

WELCOME TO

Loving Disagreement: Christian Wisdom for a Polarised World

JOHN STOTT LONDON LECTURE 2022

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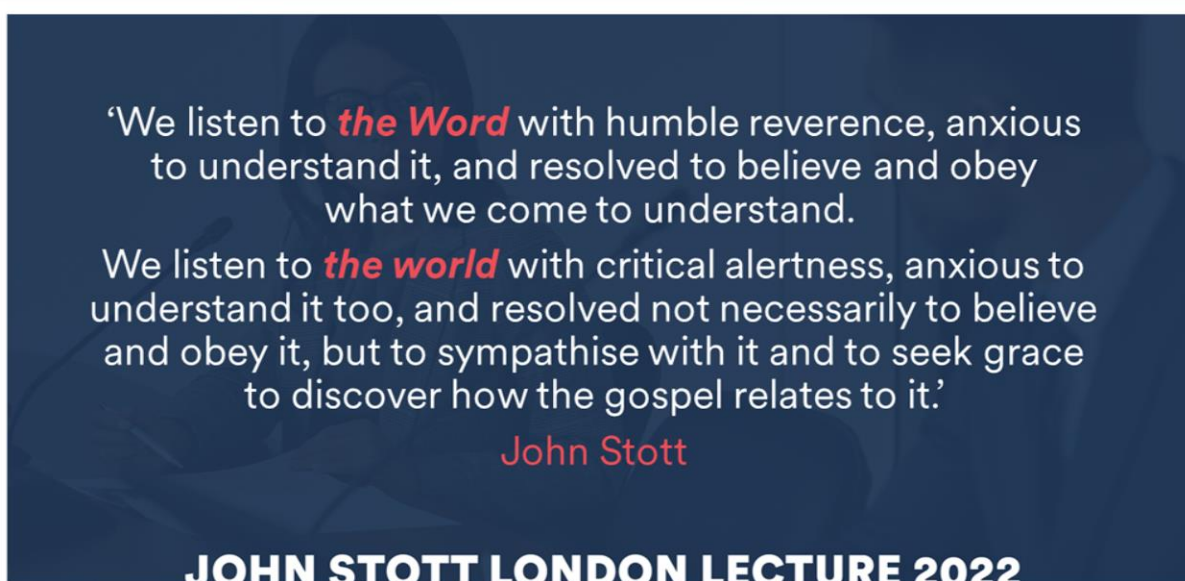


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‘We listen to *the Word* with humble reverence, anxious to understand it, and resolved to believe and obey what we come to understand.

We listen to *the world* with critical alertness, anxious to understand it too, and resolved not necessarily to believe and obey it, but to sympathise with it and to seek grace to discover how the gospel relates to it.’

John Stott

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Synopsis

How can we heal divisions by disagreeing well?

In a society where social and traditional media often highlight conflict instead of helping resolve it, Christians can play a distinctive role by disagreeing constructively – and with love.

As John Stott said in response to Christians criticising the media: ‘Are you pointing the finger at them? Over there? I point the finger here. It’s our fault. It’s the fault of Christian people. If only we could be the salt of the earth as we were meant to be...’

In the 2022 John Stott London Lecture, Revd Dr Christopher Landau draws on his doctoral research on the New Testament ethics of disagreement to explore how Christians can combine a commitment to love their neighbours with a desire to reveal truth – and how that can set the tone for the culture we’re in.

During the lecture, he’ll explain how John 13:35 offers a Christian foundation for loving disagreement, as Jesus teaches that mutual love within the church is what identifies it to outsiders: ‘By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’ Practising love for our neighbours within and beyond the church means we’re called to be peacemakers and bridge-builders in every sector of society.

Recognising the need to seek both unity and singular truth, he’ll also unpack our call to live out Colossians 4:6 – ‘Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.’ What does it mean to be both gracious and ‘salty’ when we disagree?

The 2022 John Stott London Lecture is hosted by LICC and organised in partnership with [All Souls Langham Place](#), [Langham Partnership](#), and [A Rocha](#).

johnstottlondonlecture.org.uk



Speaker Bio

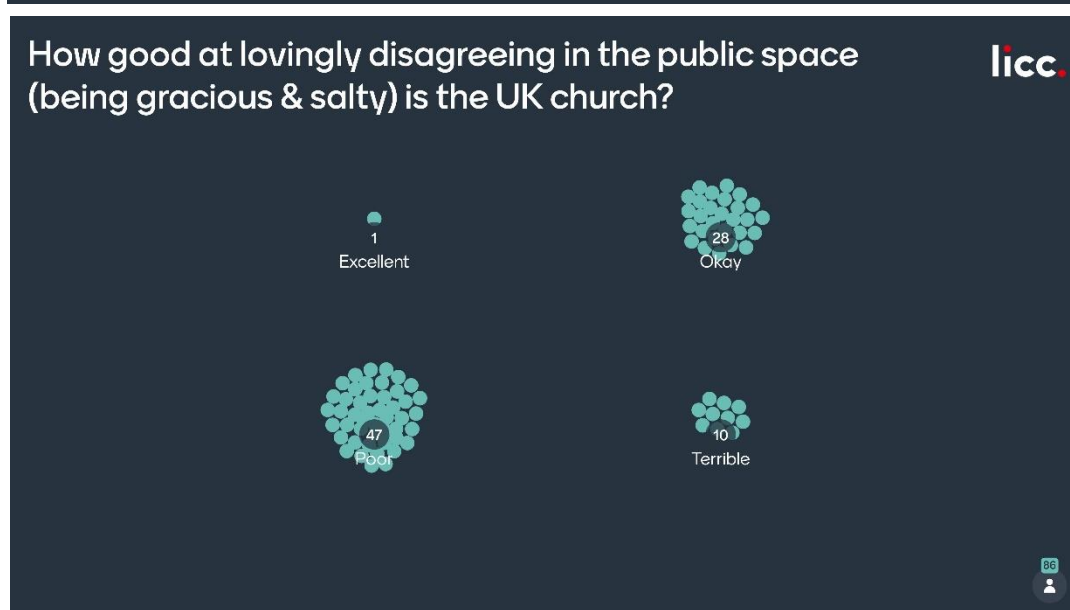
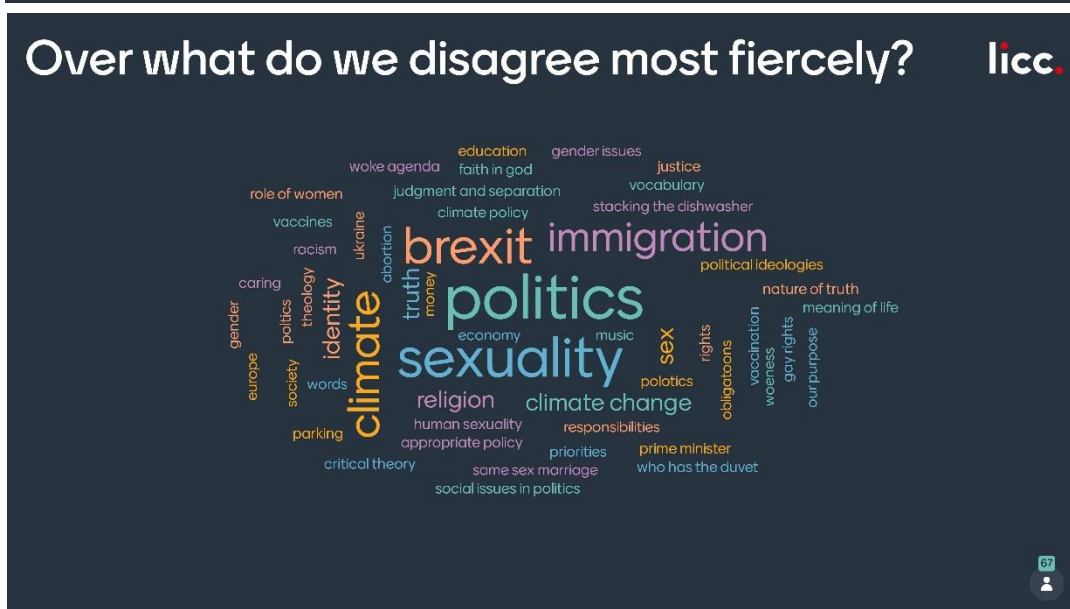
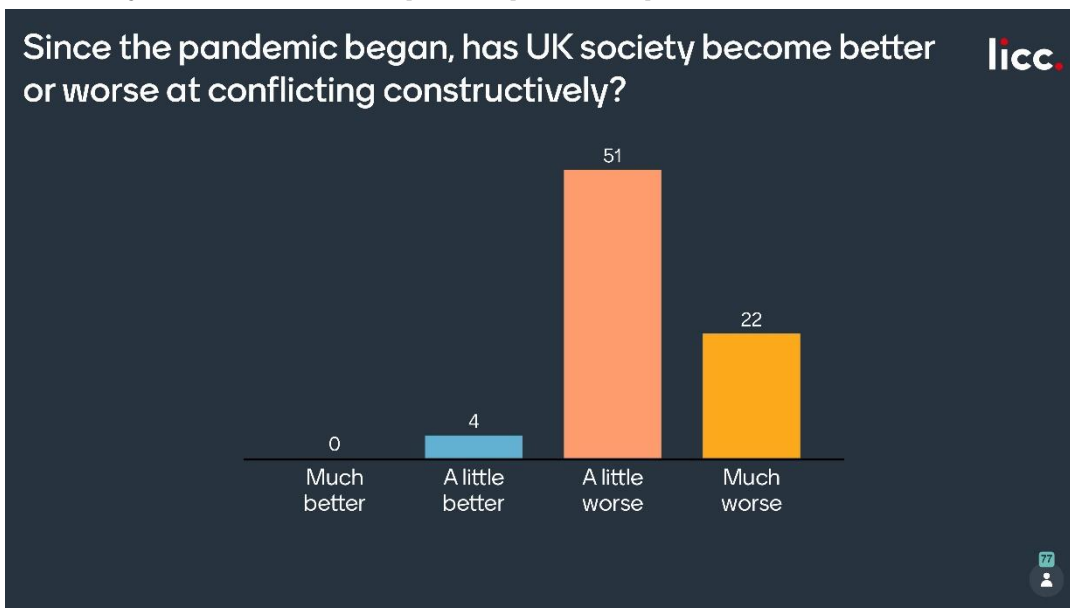
Revd Dr Christopher Landau | Director of ReSource

A journalist prior to ordination, Christopher Landau worked as a Radio 4 news reporter and TV news producer at the BBC, latterly as religious affairs correspondent for the World Service.

He joined the Oxford Pastorate as McDonald Chaplain in 2018, alongside his role as pastor to postgraduate students at St Aldate’s church in Oxford.

He is author of *A Theology of Disagreement* (SCM Press), was appointed Director of [ReSource](#) in 2021, and is a founding trustee of the Religion Media Centre. During ordination training he resumed theological study, working on Christian ethics, and was awarded his doctorate in 2017. Christopher is married to Carolyn and they have three children.

Introductory Questions and participant responses:



**Loving Disagreement:
Christian Wisdom for a
Polarised World**
with Rev Dr Christopher Landau

JOHN STOTT LONDON LECTURE 2022

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When any movement abandons a commitment that is foundational to its very self, profound problems follow.

In 1998, little more than a year after the Labour party had won a landslide general election victory after eighteen years in opposition, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, Peter Mandelson, was on a visit to California's 'Silicon Valley'.

He told a group of computer executives that he was 'intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich – as long as they pay their taxes'.

That short phrase, 'intensely relaxed', has long haunted the now Lord Mandelson, for it seemed to encapsulate the way in which a socialist political party had strayed far from its founding narrative.

This evening I want to argue that the church is too often 'intensely relaxed' about a profound way in which it routinely strays from its founding narrative.

And that concerns the way in which we approach our inevitable disagreements – both within and then also beyond the church.

In a world where polarisation is so evidently a problem, there is a particular irony here, because the church has lost sight of a set of ethical attributes that should be at the very heart of Christian witness.

This lecture draws on the work done for my doctorate in Christian ethics at the University of Oxford. But that only began as a result of my clear sense of call away from my work as the religious affairs correspondent for the BBC World Service and into ordained ministry.

So as someone who has seen church conflict up close as a journalist, and subsequently studied the underlying theology, I'm honoured to be sharing these reflections on some of the teaching about disagreement that we find within the pages of the New Testament, and what it might mean to disagree in authentically Christian ways.

We'll consider some of the key New Testament texts (and the references should appear in the chat as I refer to them); I'll then share the ethical rules I propose for Christians facing disagreement, and then later in the lecture turn our gaze outwards as we draw on some of John Stott's own wisdom about navigating our complex world in an authentically Christian way.

And this notion of authentically or distinctly Christian is important as we begin.

Within the church we hear encouragements variously to good disagreement or disagreeing well. And no doubt, good disagreement is better than bad disagreement, and disagreeing well is better than disagreeing poorly.

But I believe that loving disagreement is a distinctly, uniquely Christian call.

It's a phrase which has been used occasionally by the current Archbishop of Canterbury, including in the foreword he contributed to a book on reconciliation in 2014, when he said "Good and loving disagreement is a potential gift to a world of bitter and divisive conflict."

My contention is that good disagreement can risk sounding like an end in itself, and something with no particular theological grounding, whereas to seek loving disagreement is to enter, if you like, into a kingdom-shaped oxymoron, in other words, something where two apparently contradictory terms are brought together – loving disagreement – and they only make sense together within a Christian anthropology.

In my own reflections, Jesus' words to his disciples towards the end of John's gospel narrative have taken on a particular significance. And John 13.35 has

become the foundational text for this work, linking together as it does both loving unity and mission.

Jesus very simply says to that somewhat unpromising group of earliest followers: 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'

So often the church operates as if Jesus had ended his own sentence in a rather different way.

This of course isn't the only way to understand how the church becomes attractive to those beyond it – but I fear we too often overlook the plain sense in which Jesus underlines that the church is attractive to those on the outside when they can see the love that exists within it.

And of course later in John's gospel, famously in John 17, this loving unity is at the heart of Jesus' prayer for his followers throughout history:

²⁰ 'My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – ²³ I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

This Johannine call to loving unity within the body of Christ is powerfully expressed in two other key images within the gospel – those offered by footwashing, and the vine.

It's worth noting that just before Jesus *tells* his disciples 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.' – arguably he has just *shown* them a way of revealing the same – through his wildly counter-cultural decision to wash his disciples' feet. And while this incident is rightly often interpreted in relation to Jesus' humble servant leadership, it also reveals the kind of community the church is called to be.

At John 13:12 we read

¹² When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. 'Do you understand what I have done for you?' he asked them. ¹³ 'You call me "Teacher" and "Lord", and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

One of the themes we will keep returning to is that across the New Testament, its writers do not merely commend right belief – they are repeatedly and routinely concerned by the actions and crucially the moral character of those who follow the way of Christ.

And the vine, in John chapter 15, offers a crucial and sometimes inconveniently uncomfortable reminder of the deep interconnectedness of all those who call themselves Christians.

From John chapter 15, verse 9:

⁹As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹²My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.

Now of course this image is painfully clear about the need to remain faithful if one is to bear fruit. My concern this evening is not about how one adjudicates whether someone has departed from Christian faith, but rather how fellow Christians facing a disagreement are called to proceed – and indeed what wisdom this offers to Christians facing disagreement in their workplace or another context beyond the church.

So notice how this passages concludes, from verse 16:

¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷This is my command: love each other.

Here, again, mutual love among Christians is a key feature of fruitful Christian life.

Well before we reach what in ethical terms one might call the rules I'm proposing for loving disagreement, there are three further areas I wish to mention: the facing of disagreement; the question of anger; and Christian speech ethics.

[Disagreement being faced effectively]

It would have been perfectly possible to base this whole lecture around the council at Jerusalem as recorded in Acts chapter 15, because it is uniquely fascinating among New Testament texts in recording how an area of disagreement was faced and dealt with in the life of the early church. Just what demands should be placed on new non-Jewish believers.

From verse 6 we read,

⁶The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: 'Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles should hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.

I find it fascinating that Peter should highlight the receipt of the Holy Spirit as a particularly compelling and credible feature in the faith of Gentile converts.

Notice too the place for the Spirit in the reaching of a decision:

At verse 28:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:

Here we see the church unafraid to face a disagreement; unafraid to see this as a profoundly spiritual question; we see the emergence of early models of oversight and authority; and crucially we see the church discerning together the will of God and moving forward in unity.

Fascinatingly in the very same chapter we also come across what is in many Bible translations the only use in English of the word Disagreement.

From 15:36 we read:

³⁶Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.' ³⁷Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. ³⁹They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, ⁴⁰but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

This doesn't appear to be a doctrinal disagreement; and we never learn of it being resolved; what we do learn is that certain kinds of disagreement, even leading to leaders parting company, may not necessarily undermine the

ultimate spread of the gospel. Now no single incident of disagreement in Scripture provides a template for how we approach disagreements today, but there are fruitful observations to be made from incidents like this one.

Another question I'm often asked concerns anger. Often rather simply, Jesus got angry, so why shouldn't I? My answer takes us to Ephesians chapter 4, and that is the letter of Paul that we will return to at the end of the lecture. At the beginning of this chapter, notice the character attributes, the moral qualities that are emphasised: I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. And then from verse 26 – what I see as timeless Biblical wisdom about anger: 'In your anger do not sin'⁴: do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold.

And then verse 29:

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

The bar is set high and Paul leaves his hearers in no doubt about the qualities that should be associated with followers of Jesus. We might note that Jesus' anger is largely reserved for those religious leaders beyond the kingdom who are criticising him. But the way of the kingdom moves beyond anger. And the Beatitudes powerfully emphasise the priority of love, mercy and peacemaking:

From Matthew chapter 5 verse 7 we read...

⁷ Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

And fascinatingly this is immediately followed at Matthew 5:13 by Jesus' reminder

¹³ 'You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?

And we will return to the call to salty outreach in a few minutes.

The final area I want to touch on before sharing some proposed rules for Christian disagreement concerns what we might call speech ethics – in particular, the sustained concern outlined in the letter of James.

There is for me a searing quality to the appeal made in chapter 3, from verse 9:

⁹With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

And then from verse 17 James considers the qualities of Christian wisdom: He writes: 'the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.'

And it's not just James; Paul cautions Timothy in his second letter Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly.

I'm not saying that verses such as these are entirely ignored in the contemporary church; but I am asking whether, in general, we give as much weight as the writers of the New Testament seem to expect, to moral character and the way in which Christians are called to engage with one another.

And for me many of the strands that we've been considering thus far are drawn together in chapter 3 of the letter to the Colossians.

From verse 12 – and this really is a passage that speaks for itself.

¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Well, with all that in mind I want to share with you the four particular observations which I summarise as rules for Christians seeking to practise loving disagreement:

And then after that, with references to the particular contribution of John Stott, we move to consider what this might mean for Christian life on the frontline.

Rules for Loving Disagreement – slide on screen:

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt,
so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

Colossians 4:6

Pursue Godly speech, inspired by the Spirit.

Matthew 10.19–20; Luke 12.12; Acts 4.31

Luke 12:11-12 - *'When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.'*

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Romans 12.18 (NB Ch begins 'offer body as living sacrifice')

Cultivate the fruit of the Spirit. (NB Joanna Collicutt – farmer analogy)

Galatians 5.22–3

*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. **EG apply to chairs in church/new service time*

These are offered as guiding principles for the facing of disagreement. Now my academic work was focussed on what this meant for life inside the church, but this evening, not least in honouring John Stott's vision in founding the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, our task is also to consider what it means for Christians to live as faithful witnesses in a complex world.

Perhaps some of you in the past have seen those Christian bracelets asking What would Jesus do, WWJD? In a sense this final part of the lecture is about WWJSD – what would John Stott do?

I admire John Stott's championing of gracious, patient engagement across divides within and beyond the church, always holding firm to Christian truth.

John Stott of course trained for ministry at Ridley Hall in Cambridge, where a later principal, Graham Cray, expressed its approach as "roots down, walls down". The depth of one's roots enables an open engagement including with

those where there is substantial disagreement. One might say that a rediscovery of such an approach is desperately needed in many places today.

So in this section as we look outwards to the church in mission, I want to note three particular Scriptural passages, before ending with some reflections rooted in Paul's letter to the Ephesians – described famously through the title of John Stott's commentary, as God's new society.

Firstly – the parable of the sower in Matthew 13.

I'm sure you need little reminder about the various destinations of the seed – some along the path, eaten by birds; some on rocky places without much soil, where initial growth is followed by withering; some among thorns, choked out of life; and some on the good soil, producing much fruit.

In this, I suggest we take into our public engagement, including our disagreements, a recognition that God is not surprised when not every gospel seed springs into instant and lasting life. But our task is freely to scatter, indeed to broadcast, good seed. And for me, that good seed must have within it those character attributes that we have already thought about in such detail. In essence, what it is for Christians to scatter seed of the fruit of the Spirit in their workplace, their local community, among their family, seeing this as profoundly part of gospel witness in a sceptical society.

Second, I want to note two aspects of Jesus' sending out of the twelve in Matthew chapter 10. We read from verse 16,

¹⁶ 'I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. ¹⁷ Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. ¹⁸ On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, ²⁰ for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

Disciples are not called to be doormats. To be as shrewd as a snake as well as as innocent as a dove is no easy task. But note that when challenged, as Jesus says they surely will be challenged, they are not to worry, but rather to trust that the Holy Spirit will guide their speech.

We might recall the encouragement of James to tame the tongue – the point is that in all this, we can seek God’s inspiration and guidance.

What we cannot ignore is the fact that the Christian call is costly. When Jesus says in Mark 8,

‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’

He is not offering a walk in the park. But as he continues,

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?

Yet again we are called back to the question of not whether we are called to engage with wider society, but how.

I mentioned how striking it is that Matthew 5:13’s appeal to saltiness comes immediately after the repeated Blessings of the sermon on the mount.

¹³ ‘You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.’

But I love the way John Stott himself uses this image to challenge the church about its wider social engagement. In this case referring to the state of the media, he wrote,

“...it’s no good blaming them: when the meat goes bad it’s no good blaming the meat and the bacteria that are making the meat putrify: it’s the fault of the salt that’s not there to stop it from going bad. And if the media have gone bad, so bad that we want to take our aerials out, who is to blame? Are you pointing the finger at them? Over there? I point the finger here. It’s our fault. It’s the fault of Christian people. If only we could be the salt of the earth as we were meant to be...”

We live in a time when the church risks being overwhelmed by introspection, and when we need to discover afresh how best to engage wider culture. And I think a key element in that is rediscovering how to be both salty and gracious; loving and truthful. On the front of my new book on disagreement I characterise this challenge as seeking truth, making peace and building unity. All three are important, and it’s a problem if they’re not held together in creative tension.

As I’ve mentioned, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians represented for John Stott an invitation to ‘God’s new society’

So I want to conclude by mentioning four short extracts that outline this distinctive, attractive, gracious Christian call:

First, in chapter 2 we're reminded of the astonishing bringing together of Jew and Gentile. Verse 15 speaks of Jesus creating 'in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace,¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

How much does both our church and our world need to be reminded of this foundational purpose of Christ's work: to bring peace to those near and far.

The following chapter, with its glorious prayer for the Ephesians, appropriately reminds us of God's hope for his church. I wonder if sometimes we can become rather downhearted or cynical or just deeply disappointed by human failure within the church. And yet, Paul writes from 3:20-21

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

And so much as we are right to celebrate and encourage LICC's ministry in reaching out – and I feel I should also honour A Rocha's pioneering ecological ministry - we shouldn't lose sight of this promise of glory within the church. At John Stott's beloved All Souls Langham Place and beyond! And as I hope I've shown, when the church lives in the fullness of its calling, seeking unity and truth, fostering mutual love, it becomes once again the irresistibly attractive force it has so often been before.

Then, as Eph 4:14 onwards puts it,

¹⁴ ... we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

And then in Eph 5, from verse 15, a warning.

¹⁵ Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.

Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord,²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In our worship, in our praise, at best we discover afresh from the heart what it is to live as those thankful for salvation. This it seems is the living out of a faith which requires the wisdom of a serpent and the innocence of a dove – but always ultimately as part of a body which is built up in love.

John Stott ends his commentary on Ephesians noting that Paul begins and ends the letter with references to grace and peace.

Stott writes, “No two words could summarise the message of the letter more succinctly. For ‘peace’ in the sense of reconciliation with God and one another is the great achievement of Jesus Christ, and ‘grace’ is the reason why and the means by which he did it. Moreover, both are indispensable to all members of God's new society.’

He then continues, ‘it is a wish, a prayer, that the members of God's new society may live in harmony as brothers and sisters in his family, at peace and in love with him and with each other, together with a recognition that only by his grace can this dream come true.

I believe that we desperately need to face our inevitable disagreements with this distinctly Christian hope – with a grace and peace that comes from being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Our love of disagreement has too long been a problem; but as we seek and discover loving disagreement, we embrace an authentically Christian solution, which can be a genuine blessing both for the church, and the wider world.

Closing prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ,
 You call us to know your Father,
 And be sanctified by your truth.
 As we consider the reality of disagreement
 And the call to live in loving unity,
 Help us to work for that complete unity
 Through which you say the world will know you.
 Give us grace as we face moments of difficulty;
 Remind us to hope that no situation is beyond your love;
 And inspire our words through the work of your Holy Spirit.
 In your name we pray,
 Amen.

**As you reflect on what's been said,
 what are the 'shockers'**

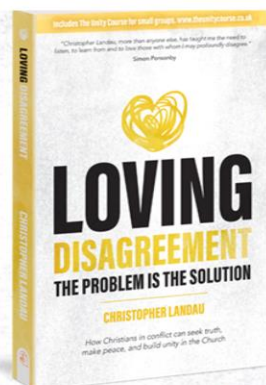
(a phrase, word, image or something from what's been said
 that resonates, stands out, or connects with you)

and what are the 'blockers'?

(something from what's been said that raises questions for you)

What's your question or comment for Christopher?

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 **LOVING DISAGREEMENT**

"Christopher Landau, more than anyone else, has taught me the need to listen, to learn from and to love those with whom I may profoundly disagree."

Simon Ponsonby



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