

A Myriad of “Truth and Reconciliation” Commissions

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We are, it is confessed among us, saved by grace: delivered by God’s good power from the power of evil; rescued by God’s generosity from the destructiveness of our own sin. Most of us, schooled in Paul, will readily affirm that that rescue and deliverance are all God’s work, not ours:

We may be surprised, however, to find in Paul’s letters virtually no use of certain words we often employ in connection with righting what is wrong. When he speaks to human beings of their wickedness, should he not call on them to *repent*? And should he not say that, after repenting, they can be assured of the peace and rightness that comes with *forgiveness*? Yet, in all of his references to the righting of what has gone wrong, Paul makes no significant reference to repentance and forgiveness.¹

The gift of new life is fully accomplished by God and so the themes of repentance and forgiveness leave little to be said.

Of course...except that the reception of the free gift from God is not easy, and the truth of that grace is not cheap. For that reason, every pastor knows that there are disciplines that belong to the reception of God’s grace, tasks inescapably entailed in the reality of forgiveness.

I.

For the most part, it is not true, as the Psalmist says,

Against you, you alone have I sinned,
and done what was evil in your sight. (Ps 51:4)

It was not true even for David who recited—according to the superscription—this Psalm; he had sinned against God to be sure, but also against Uriah and Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:9). Characteristically our distorted lives violate our relationship both with God and with neighbor. That is why, along with the “first commandment” there is always a “second like unto it” (Mark 12:29-31). As violation of Torah characteristically involves both God and neighbor, so the work of forgiveness relates both to God and neighbor.

I take it that this double fruit of sin and the commensurate double task of receiving forgiveness were in Jesus’ purview in his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (Matt 5:23-24)

A “gift at the altar” might indeed be a fresh approach to God, an acknowledgement of God’s rule, an articulation of gratitude for right or restored relationship with God. One cannot come to such a gift-giving enterprise with God, however, until there is reconciliation with the neighbor who has a grievance.

In the teaching of Jesus the term “reconcile” is left uninflected. We may take it to mean, whether by word or by act, to right a wrong. Such a righting of a wrong clears the way to continue the journey to the altar for gift-giving to God as an act of acknowledgement, an articulation of gratitude, and restoration of that relationship that has been breached. The journey interrupted by neighbor reality, when completed, leaves one in the position to love God and to love neighbor afresh. There is no question in the teaching of Jesus any more than in the theology of Paul that the gift brought to the altar will be accepted. The path to that wondrous enactment of gift, however, is via reconciliation with the neighbor.

II.

It is plausible—I would think probable—that the teaching of Jesus cited above is rooted in the priestly instruction of Leviticus 6:1-7 (Heb 5:20-26). That priestly teaching, amid general and detailed instructions about sacrifices, provides guidance in the priestly horizon to the path to reconciliation. The beginning of the teaching is noteworthy:

When any of you sin and commit a transgression
against the Lord...

Here is a distortion against God that causes a skewed relationship with God. But the text promptly continues:

...by deceiving...(vv. 2-3)

The connection between *transgression against God* and *deceiving a neighbor* is by a single *waw consecutive*, the second filling out the substance of the first. Distorted relationship with God is accomplished by distorted relationship with neighbor.

The affront against the neighbor...that constitutes a trespass against YHWH...is a matter of economics: deposit...pledge...robbery...fraud...or something lost and found and lied about. Sins against neighbor that constitute transgression against God are not emotive or private or romantic matters. They concern, first of all, hard-nosed materialism about economic transactions of a systemic kind that block communion with God. The sin is thus double-edged...surprise, surprise!...God and neighbor! Notice, moreover, that the sin is not twofold. It is one act that affronts both God and neighbor.

Given such an analysis of sin, it will not surprise us that the antidote to such sin is also double-edged and requires the completion of two tasks in turn, the same two tasks identified by Jesus in his teaching on reconciliation.

The first task, according to Leviticus 6:4-5, is a full acknowledgement of what has been done against the neighbor, the capacity to recognize violation of the neighbor for what it is, and a resolve to overcome that violation:

When you have sinned and realize your guilt, and would restore what you took by robbery or by fraud or the deposit that was committed to you, or the lost thing that you found, or anything else about which you have sworn falsely. (Lev 6:4-5a)

The agenda of reconciliation matches the detail of the affront given in verses 2-3: robbery...fraud...deposit...lost thing. The operational words are “would restore.” The verb “restore” means to return to the owner what is rightly the property of the owner that has been inappropriately taken. Hebrew lacks any subjunctive mood that would yield “would,” but the translation reflects the resolve to do what is still at the moment contrary to fact. Thus the recognition may evoke an intention to intervene in order to change the situation. The subjunctive of recognition is voiced in verses 4-5a. Then comes the imperative of action:

You shall repay the principal amount.
You shall add one-fifth to it.
You shall pay it to its owner,
when you realize your guilt. (v. 5b)

The required action is expressed in three verbs. The first, “repay,” is *shalem*, a regular form for retribution that is linked to the familiar noun *shalom*, thus shalom-making. The second verb “add” concerns a requirement, perhaps a fine, whereby more is given back to the neighbor than has been taken from the neighbor. The measure of twenty percent in addition is a standard one that is required in a series of practices related to redemption (see Lev 5:16; 27:13, 15, 27, 31; Num 5:7; in Gen 47:24 it is the measure of rent paid to Pharaoh by sharecroppers.) The twenty percent is clearly a significant amount of cash for an economic transaction added to the principal, in our case no doubt to underscore the gravity of the affront, no doubt a significant amount to dramatize in a face-to-face culture a visible gesture indicating serious reparation that entails both economic cost and social face. The payment is a clear, public announcement of a violation, an intentional act to move beyond the violation. In a word, this is *an act of reparation* that constitutes the first step in reconciliation.

It is, however, of immense importance that this pivotal text on overcoming sin does not stop with neighborly reparations. If the sin were only against the neighbor, reparations might suffice. But the affront is, “When you sin and commit a trespass *against the Lord*.” Thus after reparation toward the neighbor, there remains the affront against YHWH that is constituted through the economic violation of the neighbor. For this, more is required, more that can be affected only through the priest:

And you shall bring to the priest, as your guilt offering to the Lord, a ram without blemish from the flock, or its equivalent, for a guilt offering. The priest shall make atonement on your behalf before the Lord, and you shall be forgiven for any of the things that one may do and incur guilt thereby. (Lev 6:6-7)

The offering to be given is a “ram without blemish” or an equivalent, an animal of immense value in an agricultural economy. Such an animal is the best, the most

expensive that can be offered. This particular priestly manual skips over the detail of slaughter and sacrifice, and characteristically offers no interpretation of the meaning of the act concerning how or why the offering of an animal accomplishes reconciliation. The priests seem committed to the proposition that the *act*—without any “theory of atonement”—accomplishes what must be accomplished in the broken relationship within the fractured relationship with YHWH. Thus the conclusion in verse 7 is that the priest “makes atonement,” that is, accomplishes reconciliation. The outcome is forgiveness. The point that strikes me as important is that the priest effects the reconciliation, something the penitent cannot do for himself/herself. I judge that the priest is essential because the transaction is essentially *a sacramental one* that depends upon a credible, sustainable communal world of symbolization in which the guilty party is willing to participate by offering a costly contribution that becomes a vehicle and sign of moving past the affront against YHWH.

III.

I suggest that we can learn something important by considering an interface between the two texts in Matthew 5:23-24 and Leviticus 6:1-7. The priestly construction of Leviticus 6:1-7 consists in two actions, *a neighborly reparation* and *a sacramental submission* to the mystery of divine forgiveness. Both acts in turn are expensive, first repayment plus twenty percent to the neighbor and then a flawless ram, a male animal upon which the future of the flock depends. The teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:23-24 does not correlate precisely with the text of Leviticus, even though it is clearly reminiscent of it. In the Matthew text the circumstance, not unlike that of Leviticus 6:2-3, is one of alienation when “your brother or sister has something against you,” that is, the brother or sister has been affronted. The cause of alienation is not as specific here, but the critical remedy is parallel: First be reconciled to your brother or sister. The verb “be reconciled” is not inflected or expositied at all, but one may imagine that the act of reconciliation requires a substantive gesture of some kind, perhaps a verbal sign of apology and/or abasement, or perhaps a more substantive gesture commensurate with the substantive nature of the affront. One may imagine that the requirement constitutes something of a serious act of submission to the wronged brother or sister, more than a generic gesture found adequate in therapeutic society. Of course one must conclude that the act is one of reparation that is indispensable for reconciliation.

With that act completed, one may approach the altar with a gift. To be sure, this teaching of Jesus is not directly about “atonement” nor is the gift identified as a “guilt offering.” Only two things are clear. First, the reconciliation remains incomplete without an approach to the altar, suggesting that more is entailed in forgiveness than simply a transaction with the neighbor. And second, an approach to the altar is not empty-handed, but with a gift that signifies a personal, serious engagement in approach to the place of Presence. It takes no stretch of imagination to see that in this teaching, like that of Leviticus, two acts are required in sequence, neighborly reparation and sacramental submission, both requirements entailing giving something of self away in acts of divestment and gestures of vulnerability.

IV.

It is worth noting that neither text offers any theory of atonement or any

explanation about how restoration of relationship is accomplished. Nor does the text tell against a theology of unconditional grace, for it is an act of grace that God has provided these means for restoration, the means of *the altar* and its sacramental capacity and, derivatively, the means of *the text* that guides, also a gift of grace. The *altar* and *text*, *sacrament* and *word*, are both gifts of God for the completion of the tasks of the reception of God's forgiveness.

Grace offered by sacramental and textual means must be actively received, in both cases by costly gestures toward God and toward neighbor. By focus upon the two steps in both texts (*reparation and sacramental submission*), it occurs to me that this twofold requirement correlates with the work of the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" in South Africa. However that title for the commission came about, the phrasing is a mouthful of evangelical theology. The phrase recognizes a two-step process of reconciliation and understands how it is that the two steps are in sequence. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of course is easily criticized for being inadequate in many ways. It is to be recognized, nonetheless, that its enactment was in an arena of remembered violence and a bottomless deposit of present alienation of a most powerful kind. The task of the commission concerns the revivification of society in the midst of a real life-and-death struggle...nothing pretty.

The first step in such reconciliation is *truth*. The truth must be told about a violation of neighbor, and every "violation" perforce participates in *violence*. The truth must be told about violence perpetrated by one neighbor against another. In Leviticus 6, the violence is economic; in Matthew 5, the affront is unnamed, simply "something against you." The violence must be named and owned; gestures of compensation, remorse, and reconciliation for an alternative must be articulated, perhaps verbally, perhaps concretely in monetary terms. The overcoming of alienation is not cheap or easy, but requires truth-telling whereby the offender is placed at the behest of the offended in some concrete way.

Only when *truth* is told, can approach be made to the altar of atonement, that is, to the place of reconciliation. Reconciliation is finally not in the hands of the neighbor. It is in the hands of the priest (explicitly in Lev 6, surely implied in the "altar" of Matt 5), the one charged with nurturing and practicing the most elemental signs of holiness to which the community attests. The priest in both cases, on behalf of the present holy but unseen God, receives the gift, something of value. Of course in such a transaction there are risks of bribery and reciprocity and even Anselm's notion of "satisfaction." The gift must nonetheless be offered as a gesture of submission, divestment, and vulnerability, the ceding over of one's life to the mysterious worship of God's holiness. In sacramental awareness, we do indeed leave the altar differently, for the altar constitutes an arena for the transaction of "trans-substantiation" that is better left unexplained because more happens than can be explained.

V.

As I thought about these two texts, the condition of our society, and the pastoral office, it occurred to me that we live in a social context where guilt and therefore forgiveness have been trivialized to be irrelevant, whether it is a matter of rote repetition of "confession and assurance" or whether it is a mumbled whisper of embarrassment.

We live in a society that is deeply alienated; but we also live where the church and its pastors have entrusted to it the awesome, grace-given vehicles of restoration. The recovery of pastoral practices of reconciliation might include the two steps outlined by the priests that are echoed by Jesus:

1. *Truth-telling reparation toward affronted neighbor*, a truth-telling that might be concerned with large, public alienations or it might be so concrete as alienations within families or congregation. The church may indeed be the arena for truth-telling that does not grovel in guilt but that readily undertakes the first step in reconciliation.

2. *Sacramental reconciliation* that requires a priestly enactment of divine reception of costly self-submission and a verdict that the gift is adequate...made adequate by the gracious God who receives. On this latter point, I have pondered pastoral authority. I am of course aware of the abusive misfortune of the old priestly notion of “absolution” that is an affront to evangelical Christians. That old priestly practice smacked of authoritarianism and a hint of two-tiered notion of church, of first-rate priests and second-rate laity. In the place of that practice, however, we have largely forfeited the priestly performative act of reconciliation which, I have no doubt, requires a formal priestly utterance done with *gravitas* commensurate to our ocean of alienation and appropriate of the new life that is born in, with, and under priestly utterance. A general good feeling or a therapeutic affirmation is no adequate substitute for a priestly performative verdict about the willingness of God to receive our submitted, divested, vulnerable selves.

VI.

The dramatic capacity of the church and its pastors in this regard is an astonishing, wondrous counterforce to the world of alienation that is all around us. There is, moreover, no other way to have the vicious cycles broken, and therefore we endlessly repeat the patterns of alienation that inevitably culminate in deathliness.

My son John teaches in a fairly typical college social science department. He has observed over time that in every departmental meeting in his work, all the old hurts and alienations are endlessly reiterated over and over among colleagues. (I myself have seen traces of such faculty transactions in a somewhat different venue.) John, no mean theologian, observed: “The endless reiteration of such pain is because none of the colleagues are believers. Consequently, they have no way to break the cycles of anger.” What an insight so pertinent to our society!

Entertain that the church has entrusted to it by God the means of grace—*neighborly reparations* and *sacramental submissiveness*—that can break vicious cycles of alienation and make restoration to life possible. That evangelical reality is of course an embarrassment in a society where *truth* is rarely told and *reconciliation* is most often cheap and surface. The enactment of such an alternative is at the core of our faith, however it is that we speak of “atonement.” At the center of such activity is the pastor who has more entrusted in the pastoral office than we usually notice. If we were more self-aware of what belongs to the pastoral office, then we might recognize that what we do in the pastoral office is to conduct and enact myriads of “Truth and Reconciliation Commissions.” Such commissions occur randomly here and there; they have their primal locus in the weekly liturgy of forgiveness where all of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and where all of the needfulness of God’s people is dramatized, and where the fullness of God’s grace is made available. In that centered

environment of grace and gratitude, *neighborly reparation* and *sacramental submission* make sense as they make sense nowhere else. The enactment of such “Truth and Reconciliation Commissions” may be the most important “social action” that we can undertake!

Note

1. J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 87.