Some Reflections on the Theology of Reconciliation

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[1] Last January, I attended an academic conference in Pittsburgh. During a break, we were given the option of visiting the Andy Warhol Museum or meeting representatives from South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was established to provide an opportunity for the perpetrators and victims of atrocities that had occurred under apartheid to receive forgiveness, amnesty, and healing. Lead by Desmond Tutu, from 1994 -2000, several thousand cases of brutality were resolved peacefully through a process of confession and absolution. Although the TRC's accomplishments have been debated, no one doubts that a great deal of bloodshed was avoided. Indeed, TRC has inspired similar commissions in places of enduring conflict, such as Northern Ireland, the Sudan, Columbia, and the Middle East. I asked myself: Should I go look at silk screens of Marilyn Monroe and Campbell Soup? Or should I meet some of those responsible for initiating a new response to injustice - one that substituted degenerative cycles of violence with regenerative patterns of forgiveness? Like many others, I chose the latter option.

[2] At the meeting, the representatives were seated a long table on a stage in a theater. Among their number were persons white and black, male and female. After some brief remarks, the audience began to ask questions. The first few were polite and gracious. Most of us were in awe of these people. But then the academic scalpels came out. "Just what is truth?" someone asked. "Just what is reconciliation?" asked another. The representatives were trained psychologists, ethicists, and theologians. But these simple questions caught them off-guard. Each offered answers from his or her perspective and experience, but it became apparent that there were no straightforward answers that avoided contradiction, even among the representatives themselves. Some in the audience remarked that these contradictions signified conceptual confusion and drift. In response, the representatives became impatient with the abstract nature of the discussion. One theologian from the TRC - a large white man with white hair, describe how richer
he was from his role in creating a different future for South Africa. But in end, he only could recount what he had witnessed. When this did not satisfy, he became angry and refused to explain himself or justify his actions further.

[3] Since that afternoon, I have thought about these questions. What is truth? Everyone agrees that truth-telling is the first step in reconciliation. Reconciliation requires a recounting of atrocities before forgiveness becomes possible. In the face of atrocities, however, telling the truth is complicated and difficult. Particularly in South Africa, the truth was not straightforward. The line between perpetrator and victim was often blurred - those who defended apartheid and those who overthrew it both committed atrocities. Moreover, the truth told after a conflict is often colored by our own experience - it is not the truth of a historical event, but a truth that arises from traumatic wounds. What is reconciliation? Everyone agrees that reconciliation is a process of letting go of the past in order to live at peace in the future. The process of reconciliation, however, is not scientific - there is no set procedure for bringing together persons who have wounded each other. Reconciliation is more like an art one masters with difficulty. Indeed, several persons question whether there is a fixed process of reconciliation at all.

I have also thought about the white theologian. Could it be that, in the end, he was not an expert who could demonstrate his technique, but a witness to something over which he had no power? Contact with this power cannot be bought or sold; it was not a technique that yielded predictable results or something produced at will. It was a gift received through surrender.

[4] I cannot comprehend the meaning of truth and reconciliation. I suspect that no one can. But I offer the following as a kind of meditative prayer on two key passages in the New Testament on reconciliation. In Ephesians 2:14-18, we read that reconciliation is accomplished through Jesus Christ. Christ has broken down the wall of hostility that exists between Jews and Gentiles, for “he is our peace.” The peace referred to here is not merely the end of hostilities, but shalom, the presence of harmony and wellbeing. Christ is this peace, for he has created "in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace." Christ has "reconciled both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to those who were far off and to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father." In 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, we read that this reconciliation changes radically the way Christians treat each other. "From now
on," Paul writes, "we regard no from a human point of view," for "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" This gift of becoming a new creation is "from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." Therefore, having received this birthright, Paul admonishes his listeners to "be reconciled to God."

[5] As John W. de Gruchy notes in Reconciliation (2002), these two passages identify a "Pauline" conception of reconciliation. At the forefront are Trinitarian themes. In both passages, the cross of Christ lies at the center. In the Ephesians passage, the cross represents the actual point in which Christ reconciles the world "in his body." In the passage from 2 Corinthians, the cross makes the ministry of reconciliation possible through enacting a prior reconciliation between God and humanity. As a result, "the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all" so that "those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."

[6] In The Wound of Knowledge (1990), Rowan Williams writes that serious reflection on reconciliation "begins from the experience of being reconciled, being accepted, being held (however precariously) in the grace of God." This experience is tied directly to the cross, the "final control and measure and irritant in Christian speech." The cross disorients us, providing the possibly of wholeness, gathering those parts of our lives that resist integration. If the "heart of 'meaning' is a human story, a story of growth, conflict and death, every human story, with all its oddity and ambivalence, becomes open to interpretation in terms of God's saving work." The cross also de-centers us, turning our attention to the "other," to those unlike us. As Williams writes, "the 'un-selfing' involved in union with Christ's death is made real in the public and social world; the displacing of the ego becomes a giving 'place' to others, as God has given 'place' to all in his Son."

[7] But if the cross lies at the center, it shares that center with the Spirit. Through the Spirit's indwelling, we become new creatures. Both passages describe the Spirit as new life itself, as a new world of possibilities, a new future that is ours as a result of our new identity. Thus, later in 2 Corinthians we read, "now is the acceptable time," "now is the day of salvation." This state of possibility, of new birth, resists assimilation and categorization, which is why the topic of reconciliation frustrates academics. Like a birth it is chaotic and unpredictable,
disrupting our illusions of control. Indeed, one feature of post-modernity is that there is little room for surprise, for those things that deviate from the norm. This is why the normal cycles of violence and vengeance appear inescapable. Yet the Spirit witnesses that a new future at hand through forgiveness and reconciliation.

[8] The greatest work of the Spirit is to give us the power to live cruciform lives patterned after Christ’s work of reconciliation. This is why the theme of imitation recurs throughout the Pauline writings, a theme that at the same time incorporates three mysteries: One mystery is that this experience is not an achievement. As Williams notes, Paul makes clear his “helplessness” in the face of a “totally demanding and transforming fact, the death, and life past death, of Jesus the Messiah.” The Christ-like life can only be received as an act of grace and mercy. Another mystery is that we experience this transformation as good news, for it makes us aware of our present state of misshapenness, as well as the vulnerability and cost of true discipleship. The final mystery is that this obedience is the source of healing and wholeness. In following Christ, we do not lose ourselves, but receive our true selves. This is why, when we engage in forgiveness and reconciliation, we receive our true dignity.