

Church apologies and the politics of reconciliation

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Apology is in the air, and people are taking notice. In 2006, the Canadian Prime Minister apologized and offered compensation to Chinese-Canadians who had had to pay a racist “head-tax” to immigrate to Canada. Some wondered why the government apologized for an injustice against Chinese immigrants but not for unjust policies affecting others groups. The U.S. Senate apologized in 2005 for its failure to enact anti-lynching legislation. Some critics charged that the legislators’ “empty rhetoric” was an attempt to court African-American voters. After his reading of a medieval emperor’s negative comments about Islam provoked an outcry, Pope Benedict XVI expressed personal regret about how his words had been interpreted. Critics complained that it was a

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very qualified “non-apology” or noted that the pope had missed an opportunity to repent more generally of the church’s long history of violence against Islam.

In 1986, the United Church of Canada apologized to First Nations people for making acceptance of Western civilization a condition of receiving the gospel. Twenty years later, the commemoration of this apology indicated that much reconciling work remains to be done.¹ When the Presbyterian Church (USA) repented in 1987 of anti-Jewish attitudes and rejected supersessionism—the teaching that God’s covenant with the Jews

has ended—the church committed itself to rethinking Christian theology and practice, a process still in its infancy.² Yet, this act has opened new opportunities for dialogue between Christians and Jews. At a “Day of Pardon” service during Lent 2000, Pope John Paul II asked God’s forgiveness for sins such so as “those

committed in the service of truth” and those “which have harmed the unity of the Body of Christ.”³ Some observers were quick to point out that the pope did not ask forgiveness for what the church did but only for what individuals in the church did. Others felt that even these limited admissions just gave ammunition to the church’s critics.

Mennonite churches have issued a few statements of apology or repentance, and have made some requests for forgiveness. In 1986 the Mennonite Brethren church in Canada asked for and received forgiveness from the Conference of Mennonites in Canada for past practice in which Mennonite Brethren who married members of the other body were sometimes excommunicated.⁴ One commentator noted that because it was prominent leaders who made the confession, for specifically named sins, the apology helped shape new relationships.⁵ A 1989 joint statement by the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church confessed the church’s complicity in patterns of racism and pledged to work for racial justice.⁶

These are just a few examples of a recent increase in corporate apologies—by nations, churches, companies, other institutions—for past wrongs. Corporate apologies share similarities with personal apologies; they take responsibility and express remorse. Yet, the usual purpose of corporate apologies is distinct: reconciliation within communities or among nations. Such apologies are often public and formal, and are made by a representative who may or may not have been directly complicit.

Churches sometimes identify their statements as apologies but more often as statements of repentance or confession or as requests for forgiveness. Joseph Liechty, a professor of peace, justice, and conflict studies, writes that reconciliation entails both repentance, which may include apology, and forgiveness. Christian tradition has usually emphasized the forgiveness aspect.⁷ My focus on apology must be considered within this larger framework. The church’s mission is to be an agent of God’s reconciling love in the world. Recognizing that its own policies and practices have caused suffering and broken relationships, the church has recently begun to repent publicly and apologize.

This article is not a set of instructions for how the church might repent, or what it might repent of. Instead I will compare

some political apologies and some church apologies. What can the church learn about the dynamics of reconciliation from an examination of political apologies? And where do the similarities end? In what way do church apologies point to theological resources for reconciliation that political apologies do not rely on?

Apologies and national or international reconciliation

A political apology lends credence to a particular reading of history. If they are authentic,⁸ political apologies will identify what

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happened and who was responsible, and will declare that the acts in question were wrong. Historical accounts are often disputed, but an apology puts forward a reading of history that recognizes the suffering of those who were harmed. Putting something on record is itself an “amend,” which can help restore a relationship, in part because it recognizes the dignity and the experience of those who suffered.⁹

Acknowledging the truth about a past wrong is powerful. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, was premised on the idea that publicly naming apartheid crimes and taking responsibility for them are ingredients of healing. If forgiveness is possible in the public sphere, it will typically require a consensus about what was wrong and who was responsible.¹⁰

A political apology is made for a specific attitude or specific actions. A government apologizes for a particular policy or act or injustice. Former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney apologized for Canada’s internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War II, but we would not expect such an official to confess the general fallenness of government policies. By contrast, Christianity’s tradition of general confession, grounded in a theological understanding of human sinfulness, sometimes allows the church to minimize its particular historical failures. After World War II, several German church leaders couched their talk of confession and repentance in this way. They argued that the German church during the Nazi era was guilty as all humanity is guilty of unfaithfulness to God. Only after much debate did German church

groups begin to issue statements that named the church's specific complicity in the rise of Nazism, the war, and the Holocaust.¹¹ A national government will not confess abstract or universal shortcomings, but it may name particular wrongs. If church apologies are to help heal the memories of particular wrongs, those wrongs need to be specifically named.

Political apologies give rise to questions about what actions are needed in order to restore a relationship. Apologies may come near the end of a reconciliation process or near the beginning, but they are rarely all that is required. Any group making an apology must consider how it will ensure that the wrong will not be repeated, perhaps through teaching about the past, monuments and commemorations, or a change in policies. And it must contemplate making reparations to victims. Similarly, as the church discerns the need to apologize for past and present racism, for example, it must commit itself to identifying and working against persistent systemic patterns of discrimination. Engaging the past penitentially always entails commitment to ongoing reform.

Many problems surround both political and church apologies. How does a group decide what to apologize for, especially if

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apologizing for anything and everything dilutes the power of such acts? What is the relationship between individual and collective guilt? Does an apology adequately distinguish degrees of complicity within a group? Is a recent immigrant to Canada somehow responsible for how the government treated the Chinese in the 1930s? Who is authorized to speak for Canadians living then, and to apologize for their actions? How can we judge the past in light of the present, especially if society's worldview has changed?

Sometimes legal agenda intrudes on a decision to apologize. An apology's possible effect on lawsuits was an issue that arose as mainline Canadian churches made statements about their involvement in Aboriginal residential schools.

The very fact that nations and churches are presently engaged in acts of corporate apology ought to remind the church of something it already knows: the church is a historical actor.

Although the mission of the church is from God, this mission is entrusted to fallible human beings. The church in history has not attained perfection; we are pilgrims on the way. The church is called to relate to the world around it as a humble companion on the journey and not as an aloof, infallible judge.

Church apologies and the nature of the church

Though nations and churches are corporate bodies with their own histories, the church has an origin and a mission that transcend its human aspect. At some point, the analogy between political apologies and church apologies breaks down. I will highlight several dynamics that illustrate the ways church apologies may be aspects of the distinctly Christian ministry of reconciliation. The church is called to engage penitentially with its past and to reconcile with hurting people, and it is uniquely enabled to do so.

The church is a communion of saints. Christians are baptized into a community that extends through time and space and transcends physical death. We are bound to Christians who have died, and to those not yet living, because we are all members of the one body of Christ. We can say “we” of the church through generations in a way that we cannot say the same of our nation. As we are inspired and instructed by the cloud of witnesses whose faithfulness continues to speak to us (see Heb. 11:4), so we are linked to the sins of those who came before us in the faith. Thus, the church has a particular calling to examine its past and to ask forgiveness for what it has done wrong, because the church through time is one body, under a single head.

A vision of the church as a communion of saints enables the church to relate to its history in a way that frees the past to be instructive for the future. Apologies for past actions are for the sake of the present and the future. To repent of how European churches treated First Nations peoples is to declare a direction for the present, one that entails a commitment to mend these relationships in the future. To repent of past failures is also to recognize that the present sins of the church have historical roots, which must be named if they are to be forgiven and in order to move forward.

By facing past wrongs with a view to reconciliation, collective apologies can create conditions for a healing of memories. As

memories of past injustices can perpetuate cycles of resentment and revenge, so a healed memory incorporates the desire for forgiveness and reconciliation expressed by an apology. When the leaders of the Catholic church in Northern Ireland and the Church of England asked mutual forgiveness for the evils the English and Irish had committed against one another, they were seeking to reframe this history in a way that prevents rather than fuels further resentment. The international Mennonite-Catholic dialogue sought to heal memories by acknowledging mutual culpability for division and prejudice. The dialogue also sought to understand Mennonite-Catholic history accurately and without negative stereotypes, and to emphasize the faith these groups hold in common.¹²

Holiness is one of the traditional marks of the church, along with unity, catholicity, and apostolicity. Sometimes the church's holiness is taken to mean that the church itself cannot sin, though members of the church are indeed sinners. In the Bible, *holiness* refers primarily to being set apart, as were the Levitical priests, for example. As the church discerns a call to repent of wrongs it has done, we may understand holiness not as moral purity but in terms of how Christ's forgiveness sets the church apart for mission. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann suggests that the church is sanctified—made holy—as its sins are forgiven in Christ: “The church is therefore holy precisely at the point where it acknowledges its sins and the sins of [humankind] and trusts to justification through God.”¹³ The church's confession of sin is a sign of sanctification, of strength in weakness that impels the church toward solidarity with the weak and service in the world.

Finally, church apologies are occasions through which the church remembers that we are a forgiven people. Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams reminds us that the church was constituted as a community forgiven of a very particular sin, the disciples' rejection and abandonment of Jesus.¹⁴ Jesus is the victim of our actions, but he is therefore also the basis of our hope. Williams also counsels penitence rather than self-criticism alone. The latter may place analysis of the past in a strictly human framework and can lead to a tyranny of our present understanding. If we assume that we know better than our unenlightened forebears—that we would never defend something as obviously

sinful as slavery, for example—then we are missing the point of ecclesial repentance. In penitence, we do not rely on our own understanding but look to God’s mercy because of the ways we continue to make Christ our victim. God’s forgiveness is not a vague sentiment. It is particular: for us, and for our sins. Indeed, we ought to use social analysis to understand the particularity of our sins, though such analysis should not be the starting point. The church is reminded that we must listen to the voice of our own

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victims, and seek to give voice to victims, not because we possess a superior social analysis, but because the church’s own Victim is the basis for the world’s hope. That is, the church must always seek to live into its forgiven-ness in ways that are patient and humble.

Conclusion

The church is always called to the ministry of reconciliation, one aspect of which is the reconciliation of social relationships. Yet only in recent decades has this ministry come to

include repentance for the church’s past sins and present failures. We need to explore quite particularly how the practice of corporate repentance serves to reconcile to the church those groups within it, such as women or people of colour, who have been oppressed by official church actions. An effective practice of ecclesial repentance will also address harm done to those who are now outside the church. At the same time, we must consider what the limits of the practice of repentance are.

Whether and for what the churches ought to repent will require ongoing discernment in denominations, conferences, and congregations, as well as the commitment to move from official statements to the conversion—turning around—of people and structures. In any case, we should not start with an abstract belief about repentance or apology and then cast around for things to repent of. Rather, the issues must arise from the context of ministry as we uncover pain, suffering, and silence caused by our actions. And we must listen to those prophets among us. Having ears to hear the truth in words of judgment requires a prayerful openness to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Notes

¹ For the 1986 statement, see <http://www.united-church.ca/policies/1986/a651.shtm>.

² An example of such rethinking is R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). For the Presbyterian statement, see www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/issues/christiansjews.pdf.

³ The text of this service and supporting documents may be found at www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/jubilevents/events_day_pardon_en.htm.

⁴ *Conference of Mennonites in Canada Yearbook, 1986* (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1986), 81. See also Conrad Stoesz, "Undoing a Long-standing Practice," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 26 April 2005; <http://www.mbherald.com/44/06/undoing.en.html>.

⁵ William Klassen, "Seeing Jesus in an MB Penitent," *Mennonite Reporter*, 28 July 1986, 5.

⁶ See www.mennonitechurch.ca/about/foundation/documents/1989-racism.htm. Denominational statements on racism are discussed in Malinda E. Berry, "On Racism, Mennonite Politics, and Liberation (Words We Don't Like to Hear)," *Vision 3* (Fall 2002): 20–28.

⁷ Joseph Liechty, "Putting Forgiveness in Its Place: The Dynamics of Reconciliation," in *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions for Theology*, ed. David Tombs and Joseph Liechty (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006), 60.

⁸ Some political apologies are undoubtedly insincere. That is, they may not be motivated by genuine remorse or desire for reconciliation, or reflect a true change in attitude. For example, Girma Negash discusses the political calculus of recent Japanese apologies and the evasiveness of President Bill Clinton's apology for failure to prevent the Rwandan genocide, in *Apologia Politica: States and Their Apologies by Proxy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).

⁹ Trudy Govier and Wilhelm Verwoerd, "The Promise and Pitfalls of Apology," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33 (2002): 67–82.

¹⁰ An excellent recent discussion about forgiveness in politics and the reconciling potential of political apologies is Mark R. Amstutz, *The Healing of Nations: The Promise and Limits of Political Forgiveness* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005). See also Donald W. Shriver Jr., *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹¹ Matthew D. Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

¹² "Called Together to Be Peacemakers: Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference, 1998–2003"; www.bridgefolk.net/dialogue2003/calledtogether.htm.

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 353.

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, rev. ed. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002).

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