

Responses

Glenn Asquith

I am glad that Margaret Wilde took on the difficult spiritual and theological issue of forgiveness for this issue of *The Hinge*. Her article is certainly timely in light of the various controversies that have caused division in several provinces of the Moravian Unity, including the issues she noted from the 2002 Synod of the Southern Province of the Moravian Church in North America. Sister Wilde presents a creative and very helpful summary of the definitions of forgiveness and reconciliation, the differences between the two, and their importance in the communal life of God's people.

As I read this, however, I think of many different contexts in which forgiveness and/or reconciliation would be very helpful but seem impossible.

In many of our mainline Protestant denominations, for example, major differences over the biblical understanding of sexual diversity in religious leadership and congregational life are dividing denominations the same way they were divided in the mid-1800s in the US over slavery and abolition. Churches, associations, and entire regions are leaving the fold of my denomination, the American Baptist Churches, USA, over whether congregations should be welcoming and affirming of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered persons. Since the early 1980s, the Southern Baptist Convention

(SBC) has been involved in major divisions over biblical inerrancy. Fundamentalist believers have taken over most of the SBC's agencies, schools, and seminaries with an agenda not only to exclude GLBT persons but also to prevent the ordination of women on the basis of a literal interpretation of certain New Testament passages and to question and reject any believers who do not express unequivocal opposition to abortion.

In these situations, as well as in similar systemic conflicts arising in the Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United Methodist denominations over issues of sexual diversity, there is not much promise of reconciliation—not to mention forgiveness—on the horizon. Each group believes itself fully right and is proceeding on that basis. Southern Baptist churches, for example, have effectively divided into two separate denominations: the Southern Baptist Convention for fundamentalist believers and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship for moderate believers. Each now has its own schools, seminaries, mission efforts, and national conferences. Reconciliation between these groups will likely never occur. *Forgiveness*, however, might be a good and valuable spiritual movement, especially for those now in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship who have been disenfranchised and rejected by the “fundamentalist takeover” of the denomination of their heritage.

Theological differences in the Moravian church have also threatened to cause denominational splits and at least have caused animosity and pain for those on both sides of the issues. Individuals have been hurt and alienated by things that have been said and actions that have been taken. Thus, I fully agree with Sister Wilde (and Lewis Smedes and others whom she quoted) that an “official” reconciliation will likely be a “pseudo-resolution” without the spiritual investment of forgiveness on the part of those affected by deep division. The question remains as to how that is best achieved.

To that end, I have been impressed with the method utilized by Bishop Desmond Tutu in his work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission following the end of apartheid in South Africa. A critical step of Tutu’s approach is “truth-telling,” in which the victims of apartheid tell the particular stories of the violence and repression they experienced directly to those who committed the acts. Tutu found that truth-telling provided the best possibility for bringing offenders to the point of realizing their wrongs and then confessing and repenting of their actions. This opened the door for true forgiveness and healing.

What if the perpetrator does not repent and confess? As Tutu says, forgive anyway! In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Tutu writes, “Forgiving means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin, but it is a loss that liberates the victim” (272). It frees us from our own prison of anger, bitterness and alienation, and thus is good for our physical and spiritual health. Thus, even if there is no reconciliation, there is healing.

Whether we are speaking of forgiveness or reconciliation, truth-telling is a central value in Christian practice that brings grace and harmony in relationships. The church at Ephesus is admonished to “put away falsehood” and “speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” Truth-telling is not meant to be an evil attack, but only for the purpose of “building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:25, 29 NRSV). When there has been hurt and damage done in relationships, I believe that truth-telling is essential, if not for forgiveness, at least for true resolution, in order to avoid perfunctory, surface-level “reconciliation” that has little meaning in the hearts of those involved.

For Further Reading

To read more about departures from the American Baptist Churches, USA, see John Dart, “American Baptists face breakup threats,” *Christian Century* 122, no. 13 (June 28, 2005), 12–13. For more on events in the Southern Baptist Convention, see Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), and Bill J. Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

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