

<sup>10</sup> In fact, at the Synod of 1769 Spangenberg questioned whether the use of the lot, which had earlier been instituted in recognition of human inefficiency in arriving at a reasoned consensus, would not be best dropped, since it remained a bone of contention. For the details see Hamilton, *A History of the Church*, 217.

<sup>11</sup> See Livingstone Thompson, *A Protestant Theology of Pluralism* (New York: Peter Lang, forthcoming).

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## The Author Responds

What a wonderful set of reflections! Could this be the right time for an extended conversation, starting perhaps with an intersynodical event or a retreat, about the many ways of seeing and doing forgiveness wherever we are in the body of Christ?

Several of you spoke from your own pain, and that kind of pain can last a long time. Brother Asquith, I first heard you grieving over the mounting schism in the Southern Baptist Church in 1983, in the Harstines' living room soon after Ted and I moved to Bethlehem. Brother Sawyer, you and I have long shared a sense of helplessness over the cycle of bitterness among God's children in Israel and Palestine. Brother Jones, you speak eloquently for those who still seek to remain faithful to a church you believe has gone astray.

I believe God grieves over these things too—as he did over Ephraim (Hosea 10:8-9), or as Jesus wept over Jerusalem because “the things that make for peace ... are hidden from your eyes” (Luke 19:42). In that sense, Brother Bennett, we do have a kind of power over the God who makes himself vulnerable, whose grace lies precisely in absorbing and redeeming our pain. Perhaps the relationship between divine and human forgiveness is not only metaphorical but sacramental: our suffering and forgiving are not only an imitation but truly an expression of God's sorrow and mercy.

Thank you, Sister Swart, for reminding us that grace broke through in South Africa when we least expected it. Glenn may be right that there's not much promise of reconciliation on the horizon, but maybe the horizon is the wrong place to look. “The kingdom of God is not

coming with things that can be observed,” said Jesus; “in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:21). God’s grace works among us quietly; the Holy Spirit has its own logic and process. We don’t know why the people of South Africa were ready to forgive, but they were. Nelson Mandela and Bishop Tutu saw it, not on the horizon but in themselves and among the people around them, and by calling attention to it they helped bring it to fruition.

Brother Jones and Brother Thompson, I would love to talk with you together—from your very different perspectives—about the authority and interpretation of scripture. When Brother Jones speaks of unity, and Brother Thompson of forgiveness, we all agree on the need to separate modern cultural understandings from the meaning of a text. But

we may have different cultural understandings of unity and forgiveness; and we may not agree on which understandings are biblical, which are modern and cultural.

Sometimes I try to set aside such disagreements, respectfully and temporarily, in order to identify points of agreement and keep the search for meaning open (as earlier Moravians were trying to do, perhaps, in their ambivalent response to theological liberalism). It doesn’t work very well with people who are sure that a text has only one meaning, apart from the wider biblical context. In such cases we have two choices: to cut off the discussion (which thankfully, Brother Jones does not want to do), or to speak the truth as we see it, and seek and offer forgiveness when our words cause division among us.