

democratically elected president, Mr. Nelson Mandela. He stepped out of prison after 27 years as a political prisoner without words of hatred and revenge. With unwavering consistency he continues to promote national unity and reconciliation.

In conclusion, it can be said that the South African experience was a complex socio-economic transformation process. While allowing enough space for people to forgive each other on an interpersonal level, the reconciliation process on a deeper level was aimed at addressing the deep-rooted historical, economic, and political contradictions in the society. In this sense I agree with Lewis Smedes' observation, cited by Margaret Wilde in her article, that forgiving is an individual process whereas reconciliation is a social process.

The teaching of forgiveness and reconciliation is indeed a necessary and valuable tool in the hand of the church, helping congregants to fully understand how they contribute to establishing the reign of God through forgiving each other and participating in processes of reconciliation.

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Livingstone Thompson

I commend Margaret Wilde for a serious attempt to address the tension evident in the Moravian Community, particularly in America. Mind you, the tension in the American church is not unique. Recent tensions in the Czech Republic and hitherto in Nicaragua and Honduras, although having different causes, indicate a propensity to tension within the Christian community in general and within the Moravian community in particular.

In responding to Wilde's paper I will first comment briefly on the issue of forgiveness. I will show that part of the difficulty in discussing forgiveness is that because of the limitations of language, those in the discussion may be using the same word but speaking of different notions. When we refer to biblical notions like forgiveness, we should be mindful not only of differences between Hebraic and Greek concepts but also of differences within Greek usage itself.

Secondly, commenting a little on hermeneutics, I hope to show that engaging difference is an ongoing part of the Moravian tradition and not some unusual "sifting" moment. I will argue that in the Moravian Church there is a fundamental tension between the Comenian and Zinzendorfan sub-traditions. This tension accounts for some of the trends and difficulties historically evident in modern Moravian hermeneutics.

Forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible

In the Hebrew Bible there are, in the main, three words usually translated into English as

“forgive” (or forgiveness, forgiving, etc.). The least common of the three is the one we find in Jeremiah 18:23, which according to Fohrer’s *Hebrew and Aramaic Dictionary of the Old Testament* comes from the root כפר meaning to placate, smear or cover.¹ A derivative of the word is found also in Isaiah 28:18, where it is translated “annulled.” It is from this root word that we get the idea of atonement found in, say, Romans 3:25.

The second word we translate “forgive” comes from the root פלל, a derivative of which we find in I Kings 8:30, Jeremiah 31:34 and Psalm 103:3. Of the three main Hebrew Bible words usually translated as “forgive,” this word is the most frequently used. In these references, the idea, evident in the form of the verb, is God’s readiness to forgive. So there is a certain character of “readiness” that qualifies the act of forgiveness, but the qualification itself is not separate from the act of forgiving. Fohrer considers this second idea of forgiveness as characteristic of God alone.

The third usage, to which Wilde refers in her quotation from Exodus 34:7, is נשח. It is the most complex of the words used to mean forgiveness because, as both Fohrer and Strong² note, the word can also mean lift, pick up, carry, take away, and count, among several other concepts. Wilde is unfortunately wrong if, as I understand it, she suggests that it is from this understanding of forgiveness that the notion of atonement comes. This illustrates the problem we find in hermeneutics today. We are operating with notions from modern usage and are inclined to impose these notions on the biblical text.

Forgiveness in the NT

The problem of going to Scripture to underline our convictions is likewise evident in use of the Greek NT. Like the Hebrew Bible, the Greek NT has three words that we translate as “forgive.” The first, χαριζόμενοι [Ephesians 4:32], is from the word χαρίζομαι and has as its root χάρις, which means graciousness, favor, goodwill, benefaction. This word is completely different from the one we find in Matthew 6:15 (Wilde’s reference), which comes from the word ἀφήμι. This latter word carries the notion of cancel, pardon, give up, abandon, and does not appear at all in Matthew 5:23-24 (Wilde’s reference).

The third word translated “forgive” is ἀπολύω, which we find in Luke 6:37. The principal idea here is that of pardon, as with a debt, and does not necessarily indicate relationship between the parties involved. A debt can be cancelled or pardoned and yet the individual is not forgiven and may certainly not be reconciled.

The Greek word διαλλάσσω, translated “be reconciled” in Matthew 5:23-24, comes from two words, one meaning “through” and the other meaning “change.” It appears that in this case the one going to worship makes the change; the text does not refer to the one against whom there might be a cause. The implication here is that both the initiative and the change take place in only one party. This idea of reconciliation would be closer to the idea of repentance. By contrast, the concept of reconciliation that we find in 2 Cor 5:18 (with

the word *καταλλάσσω*) carries the idea that the reconciliation takes place in both parties. From one idea that we find in Scripture, then, reconciliation does not necessarily require an action by both parties.

If my understanding of reconciliation in Matthew 5:23 is correct, then Wilde's assertion that "reconciliation cannot happen without forgiveness" would be misleading. From a biblical point of view, it would be more accurate to say that reconciliation cannot happen without repentance and a change of attitude. It is therefore not necessary to predicate discussion of reconciliation on any notion of forgiveness. By the same token, discussion of forgiveness, as a biblical concept, need not involve any discussion about reconciliation.

Tension in the Moravian Tradition

For us in the Moravian Church it might be helpful to realize that the tensions we experience now are connected to a pre-existing tension in the way the Moravian tradition has historically gone about reading the Bible, theology and Christian history. It seems that tension in the Moravian tradition was inevitable, as the tension first and foremost reflects the differences between the approaches of John Amos Comenius and Count Zinzendorf, the two most influential theologians in the Moravian tradition for the last four hundred years.

Comenius writes out of a pre-Enlightenment context, in which he shows a willingness to embrace reason and sees it in harmony with faith. Zinzendorf writes within an Enlightenment context and takes a position

over against rationalism, in which he limits the role that reason can play in matters of faith. What became the tension in the hermeneutics of the Renewed Moravian Church already existed in the differing hermeneutics of Comenius and Zinzendorf. It may not be necessary to attempt to resolve that tension because this plurality of views, especially on non-essentials, is itself engraved in the Moravian self-understanding.

In addition to the differences between Comenius and Zinzendorf, there seem to be two other sources of the Moravian hermeneutical tension. The first is the plurality of traditions that were formally incorporated into the Renewed Moravian Church in 1744. According to that Synod, "The renewed Brethren's Church recognizes within its pale three modes of teaching Christian doctrine, which it distinguishes as the Moravian, the Lutheran and the Reformed tropus."³ The Synod of 1774 reaffirmed this position while adding that the entire Protestant Church, which sprang from the sixteenth-century Reformation, agreed on the sole authority of Holy Scripture in matters of faith and on justification by faith. The centrality of the Scriptures was found to be consistent with the Bohemian/Moravian Brethren Church, which preceded the Reformation by some fifty years.

The differences in the three conceptions of Christian doctrine, the constitution and ecclesiastical practice, could be regarded as different ways of apprehending the one divine truth. However, none of the three tropoi was required to give up its peculiar confession

of faith in becoming a part of the Renewed Moravian Church. The result was that the three interpretive traditions were allowed to exist side by side in the new union. The plurality of ways of apprehending divine truth was seen as a precious treasure to be faithfully preserved. The Moravian Church believed it should “be of service to the [whole Protestant Church] by means of this gift ... to help it [the Protestant community] more and more fully to carry out the will of the Lord, ‘that they all may be one.’”⁴

This perception of the church as an instrument of unity has influenced the role it has played in inter-church ecumenism. However, the different hermeneutical approaches that the three tropoi brought persisted for some time, thus ensuring differences and tensions in the ways in which Scripture and the wider Christian tradition were read. In the early years of the Renewed Church, Zinzendorf played a key role in developing a bias towards the Lutheran tradition, and so the Augsburg Confession was declared to be the main confession guiding theological discourse.⁵ In the immediate post-Zinzendorf period there was an attempt to lessen the role that one confession was perceived as playing. Consequently, the current *Church Order* lists ten different confessions to which it subscribes. In addition to the Nicene, Apostles’ and Athanasian creeds, the list includes the 1535 Confession of the Bohemian Brethren, the Twenty-One Articles of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, and the Heidelberg Confession. The lesser-used 1532 Declaration of the Synod of Berne, the Shorter Catechism

of Martin Luther and the 1934 Declaration of Barmen are also part of the list. Of the whole list, though, only the Bohemian Confession of 1535 can be called Moravian.

Liberalism

Also present in the Moravian Church is hermeneutical tension of more recent vintage, arising out of conflicts over liberal theology and the extent to which the historical-critical method was to be allowed to influence Moravian hermeneutics. The reaction within the Moravian Church to liberal theology came first and foremost from the German Province because of the attempts to introduce the thoughts of Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) and Wilhelm Hermann (1846–1922) into the Moravian Seminary at Gnadensfeld. So extensive was the controversy that the Synod considered a proposal for the closure of the seminary. Although that proposal was not approved, groups that supported Moravian overseas mission threatened to withdraw their financial support.⁶

The *Church Order* of 1911 reflects the thinking of the German Synod of 1908, where the issue proved to be contentious.⁷ In responding to the theological controversies the *Church Order* retrieved earlier theological formulations that were first promulgated at the Synod of 1879. It argued as follows: “We hold fast to our genuine Moravian view, that it is not our business to determine what the Holy Scriptures have left undetermined, or to contend about the mysteries impenetrable to human reason.”⁸ Clearly, this suspicion of

reason in theological circles reflects a general mood in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁹ By contrast, the Compendium of Doctrine included in the *Results of the Synod of 1857* does not include any statement that refers to the limitation of reason, despite the limits that Zinzendorf placed on reason in his commentary on the Augsburg Confession.¹⁰

This latter source of tension, concerning the extent of use of liberal theological methodology, has been an influential factor in Protestant hermeneutics and continues to play a critical role today. The truth is that both approaches—one embracing liberal theology, and one remaining suspicious of it—belong to the broader Moravian tradition in the same way that a Comenian embrace of rationalism and a Zinzendorffian suspicion of it co-exist within the same tradition. As I have shown elsewhere,¹¹ both approaches have an important contribution to make to Moravian theological discourse today and must be allowed to do so.

For that reason I do not receive well the notion of “Sifting Time” to which Wilde refers, as it suggests that engaging difference within the Moravian tradition has not been an ongoing enterprise.

Endnotes

¹ Georg Fohrer et al., eds., *Hebrew and Aramaic Dictionary of the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1973), 126.

² James Strong, “A Concise Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible,” in *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson), 80.

³ Quoted in *Results of the Synod of the Protestant Church of the United Brethren Held at Herrnhut in the Year 1848*, IX, 104.

⁴ *Church Book of the Brethren’s Unity of the British Province*, II, 9, 44.

⁵ In the Introduction to Zinzendorf’s *Twenty-One Discourses*, the Synod of 1748 was keen to indicate the consistency of its positions with the Augsburg Confession. See for example ix-x. However, under the leadership of Spangenberg in the immediate post-Zinzendorffian period there was a trend away from some Zinzendorffian views. See Hamilton, *A History of the Church*, 216-221.

⁶ Daniel Crews, *Confessing Our Unity in Christ: Historical and Theological Background to “The Ground of the Unity”* (Winston-Salem, NC: Moravian Church in America, Southern Province, 1994), 16.

⁷ Crews, *Confessing Our Unity in Christ*, 17.

⁸ *Church Order 1911*, II, I, 2. See also *Results of the General Synod of the Brethren’s Unity 1879*, II, 6 (London: Moravian Publications Office, 1881), 10. The only difference between the 1879 and the 1911 statements on the issue is the first phrase. In 1879 it runs, “We strictly adhere to the principle which has always obtained among the Brethren, that is not our business...” etc. The 1911 statement runs, “We hold fast to our genuine Moravian view, that it is not our business...” etc.

⁹ Toland refers to this suspicion and was critical of the church in general for its negative attitude to reason. The project of deism was to show that reason in fact had a role in religion, hence Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity*.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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