

Reconciliation: On the Border between Theological and Political Praxis

Reconciliation is a theologically-charged word with politically-charged implications. The work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) raised questions about reconciliation in a political context including the "parts" or "partners" of reconciliation: truth-telling, repentance, amnesty, reparations, and ultimately forgiveness and justice. This paper explores two questions. First, are theologians ready to give up an exclusive claim on reconciliation as a theological term or, at the very least, be agreeable to the fact that reconciliation might have political as well as theological meanings? Second, if reconciliation is granted unhindered access across the borders of theology and politics, what wisdom from the theological tradition has informed the political praxis of reconciliation, and has political praxis in any way challenged our theological understanding of reconciliation? As responses to these questions, the paper looks at the theological development of reconciliation, with particular attention to the New Testament and subsequent historical praxis. It then discusses points of connection where the theological development has informed political praxis.

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I wish to extend my thanks to the Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology who extended the invitation for me to participate in this conference. I am grateful to the Global Partners Project for a grant that has allowed me to make the long journey from Memphis to Cluj. I am very hopeful about our interchange during these next days.

I wish to speak today on a topic that is religiously, culturally and historically urgent: the topic of reconciliation. Reconciliation is a theologically-charged word with politically-charged implications. In fact, I would argue that over the last fifteen years, we have witnessed a dramatic shift in the contextual meaning of the word from the world of theology to the world of politics[1]. During this time in the English-speaking world, very few books have been published that explore the Christian theological and ritual praxis of reconciliation while books that explore the political dimensions of reconcili-

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ation proliferate! Such a shift is partially explained by the worldwide attention on the dramatic events in South Africa following the end of apartheid and the establishment, work and final report of the now famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The South African experience gave focus to a nascent discussion about what constitutes reconciliation in a political context and raised fruitful questions about the "parts" or "partners" of reconciliation: truth-telling, repentance, amnesty, reparations, and ultimately forgiveness and justice. The religious status of Archbishop Tutu notwithstanding, the TRC loosened the theological moorings of reconciliation and set it adrift in a political sea.

As a theologian, I want to explore two questions about this turn of events. First, are we as theologians ready to give up our exclusive claim on reconciliation as a theological term or, at the very least, are we agreeable to the fact that reconciliation might have political as well as theological meanings? Second, if we are ready to allow reconciliation unhindered access across the borders of theology and politics, what wisdom from our theological tradition has informed the political praxis of reconciliation and has political praxis in any way challenged our theological understanding of reconciliation? In other words, has theology taught politics something about reconciliation and has politics taught theology something in return?

To this end, I first will explore, in broad strokes, the theological development of reconciliation, with particular attention to the New Testament and subsequent historical praxis. I then will discuss points of connection where I believe the theological development has informed political praxis. This will be followed by a brief discussion of where I see political praxis challenging aspects of reconciliation that have been under-emphasized in the theological tradition. The paper will conclude with an attempt to define reconciliation in a way that embraces both its theological and political contexts. I will claim that reconciliation, as a theological reality, is a word that is final in the eschatological hope it implies and non-final in its lived reality. While I will not draw specific conclusions about the religious and political context of Transylvania, I believe that my remarks have implications for this context, which I hope will be explored in our later discussions.

Reconciliation in the Christian Tradition

In the New Testament, Paul speaks of reconciliation as a legal term for the restoration of relationship between husbands and wives (1 Cor 7:11). But in other places, Paul theologically stretches the term to describe the initiative by God to reestablish communion with a humanity that has been justifiably excluded from relationship with God. "For while we were yet enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (Romans 5:10)[2]. According to Paul's theological vision, this is the core of the good news: God has graciously taken the initiative and recon-

ciled human beings to God's self in Christ. This reconciling embrace of humankind broke the reign of sin and alienation, and inaugurated the reign of God where communion with God has both a present and a future possibility. Restored relationship is at the heart of Paul's theological understanding; communion between God and humans is reconciliation. Only as a consequence of this communion are humans saved from death and offered the unlimited possibilities of salvation and redemption.

Paul goes on in his second letter to the Corinthians:

Anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. I mean that God, in Christ, was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting human transgressions against them, and that He has entrusted the message of reconciliation to us. This makes us ambassadors for Christ, God as it were appealing through us. We implore you, in Christ's name: be reconciled to God! (2 Cor 5:17-20)

Paul's next theological step is to demonstrate that the reconciled relationship between divinity and humanity through the saving work of Christ is now the model of relationship that those who confess Christ must embody. In other words, Paul believes that Christ has entrusted the ministry of reconciliation to his followers who must undertake the same reconciling work of Christ in their relationships with other human beings. He implies that only by embracing Christ in faith can one live a life that is both reconciled and reconciling. Divine reconciliation is the precondition to human reconciliation: one must accept God's reconciliation so that one can effect reconciliation as a mediator/ ambassador of Christ's work of reconciliation.

What exactly is this ministry of reconciliation? Is it merely a theological construct to explain the significance of Christ or does it have ethical consequences? If we think of Paul using a model of communion to describe the content of reconciliation, then to live a life of communion implies that the follower of Christ cannot exclude anyone, not even those whose transgressions could be justifiably held against them. Perhaps this is what Paul means when he says, "everything has been made new." But does this imply that sin has no consequences, that forgiveness of the sinner supercedes the demands of justice? If this is the case, why does Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians exhort the community to expel from their midst the man who was living with his father's wife (1 Cor 5:1-13)? How can the followers of Jesus both undertake his ministry of reconciliation and expel certain sinners from their midst?

To answer this problem, one is brought back to the narratives of the Gospels. While exploring every Gospel passage where restored relationship is mentioned or implied would delay us too long, I focus only on the one activity of Jesus of Nazareth that the Gospel's provide an abundant witness: eating[3]. In narrative after narrative, Jesus is presented as eating meals or promising to eat with people whose place on the socio-economic scale range from top to bottom. The Gospels report

that Jesus uses these occasions to invite forgiveness, to challenge hypocrisy, to teach about justice. In the end, social boundaries are broken and redrawn by Jesus (Shriver 1995, 40). Why at a meal? It is here that Jesus renegotiates social boundaries and challenges all previous barriers as to with whom one can eat. He welcomes the Gentiles, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the lame, and the list goes on. By making space at the table for those previously excluded from the table, the Gospels portray Jesus as issuing two invitations: he invites those at the table to reconsider their "purity" and make room for those once thought "impure", and he invites those previously excluded because of their status to consider their lives and make changes. Both invitations are invitations of repentance. In this way, not only does he create space in the exterior place where the meal occurred, but, through repentance, space is created in the interiority of each diner's heart.

Is not what we see Jesus doing in these Gospel narratives the same thing we hear Paul theologizing about in his letters: reconciliation as restored relationship? Yes and no. I believe a small distinction can be noticed in the "praxis" of Jesus and the "theologizing" of Paul. Jesus literally practices companionship, "breaking bread with" the righteous and the sinner, inviting each to create space for the "other" at the table. The breaking of the bread celebrates this creating of space; otherwise, the meal is not possible. Paul's theological project, on the other hand, is to use reconciliation as restored relationship as a core theological metaphor to interpret the ministry of Christ as the everlasting reconciliation of God with humanity. God's reconciling action precedes any action by humans to effect reconciliation. Yet, Paul cannot escape praxis and must face new pastoral problems that confront the early believers. What if the summons to be a new creation reconciled in Christ is ignored, even after repeated opportunities, by individual members of the community? What must the community do with those who refuse to change their lives? A pastoral solution emerges, that of excluding the sinner from communion with the community, a practice to which Paul witnesses in First Corinthians and which is also seen in Matthew's Gospel.

If any member of the Church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Mt 18:15-17)

These verses speak of a genuine pastoral problem for the early communities. How were they to maintain the literal "companionship" in the example of Jesus yet maintain an ethical standard of behavior that was required by those who professed the name of Jesus? The solution is to expel the sinner from their midst and isolate him. However, such action is not punitive but is medicinal; the sinner is excluded as strong medicine to be healed of whatever is keeping her from responding

to the community's invitation to repentance. Even so, it is startling to find in this passage that the very people the Gospels portray Jesus desiring to eat with (Gentiles and tax collectors) are presented as models of absolute "otherness" that the community must avoid. Already, the meal has become less a vehicle to break down social barriers and more the way barriers of identity are constructed.

It is not surprising that the early Christian church seized upon a communal meal as a way to continue the reconciling ministry of Jesus. However, the exclusion of certain sinners from the Eucharistic table and the pastoral processes developed to lead them back to full communion with the community demonstrate that what begins as a pastoral solution, practiced for the sake of the future salvation of the sinner, soon becomes a way for the community to reaffirm its own identity. And by the fourth century, it becomes a way for the community to exercise direct control over those who it judges to be impure or immoral. We witness a shift from eating as a sign of "a new egalitarianism of spiritual and material resources" as witnessed in the Gospels to eating as a mark of Christian identity over and above other competing identities (Crossan 1991, 263). The increasing harshness of the penitential discipline, including the law that it was available only one time after baptism and the imposition of certain juridical obligations after reconciliation with the Church (such as lifelong celibacy and being banned from church office), leads to its demise as a pastoral strategy. It is eventually replaced by the tradition of confessing one's faults to a spiritual director, men and women with capacities for spiritual healing and insight, seen in the Eastern desert tradition by the second and third centuries and in the Celtic tradition in the West by the fifth and sixth centuries. Yet, it is interesting to note that even as the practice of this new penitential form becomes dominant, the earliest insight of the ancient church to connect the ministry of reconciliation to a communal meal is not lost totally. The rarely used form of solemn penance, which included excommunication from the Eucharist and the granting of the *pax ecclesia* through readmission to Eucharistic communion, lasted in the sacramentaries until the fifteenth century.

By the time that the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) defines and the Council of Trent (1563) canonizes the four parts of sacramental penance – confession, contrition, penance and absolution – the practice of reconciliation has been totally juridicalized, privatized and clericalized. It has become totally disconnected from the Eucharist, only the ordained could serve as confessors, and emphasis was placed on secrecy through the practice of anonymous confession and the confessional seal. In return for such dramatic developments away from the broader tradition of early church, the ministry of reconciliation was guaranteed to be sacramentally efficacious if all of its parts were present. Moral purity could be restored each time a "good" confession was made. Indeed, such developments came under the reforming eyes of Luther and Calvin who disputed that such a sacramental system could assure the reconciliation of the sinner with God. The result is that while

Luther retained the practice of confession, he changes its' meaning from sacramental efficacy to a way to receive consolation for those open to God's justification. Calvin, on the other hand, abandons the practice altogether since he saw it as anathema to his understanding of justification by grace alone and the priesthood of all believers (Shriver 1995, 52-58). Yet, while the reformers took issue with the juridical and clerical aspects of the ministry of reconciliation, they stressed the role of the divine over the individual in the work of reconciliation and de-emphasized the role of the community. This stress on the priority of the individual over the community is only given more prominence in the eighteenth century Enlightenment.

In our present theological context, we are faced with a variety of questions about reconciliation. Is it possible to reconnect the praxis model of reconciliation as restored relationship/companionship seen in the Gospels with a theology about God's work of reconciliation in Christ? How are we attempting to reconnect the role of the individual with the role of the community in the reconciliation process? How are we attempting to reconnect a theology of reconciliation with fully communal rituals of reconciliation, especially the connection to the Eucharist/ communion? In my own context as a Roman Catholic living in the United States, serious theological reflection about reconciliation beyond "going to confession" or "turning your life over to God" has all but ended. Some might say it is because we have lost a sense of sin, but I disagree. I think we have lost a sense of community and have become comfortable with our identities at the expense of knowing how to negotiate otherness. Nonetheless, the theological tradition is rich has been instructive about the praxis of reconciliation to political processes of reconciliation.

The Theological Tradition as Instructive to Political Praxis

The wisdom of the theological tradition has been instructive in shaping political praxis. Consider this definition of political forgiveness offered by one contemporary scholar.

Forgiveness in a political context…is an act that joins moral truth, forbearance, empathy, and commitment to repair a fractured human relation. Such a combination calls for collective turning from the past that neither ignores past evil nor excuses it, that neither overlooks justice nor reduces justice to revenge, that insists on the humanity of enemies even in their commission of dehumanizing deeds, and that values the justice that restores political community above the justice that destroys it (Shriver 1995, 9).

While this author is speaks of forgiveness, the definition points to a number of parts that make up a political process of reconciliation. I wish to discuss briefly three areas where the wisdom of theological praxis has been appropriated by political praxis: truth-telling as an act where the community validates individual memory; forgiveness and repentance as invitations to act with

forbearance rather than imitate the act of the enemy; and commitment to repair and redress (justice) through restored relationship[4].

Truth-Telling as an Act Where the Community Validates Individual Memory

The Christian tradition has no exclusive claim on truth. However, the inextricable connection between truth-telling and reconciliation is indisputable in the tradition. In the sacramental traditions, such truth-telling always occurs in the context of the community and in a safe place. It is the community, or at least one other individual that preserves the correspondence between the act and the memory of the act and leads to a judgment about the significance of the act. The establishment of truth is essential to the honest assessment of the act and provides the means to contextualize the act within the larger trajectory of the moral self. Finally, the truth of the act provides the necessary data on which to base a decision about how the person must redress the act. The result of the truth-telling is not to restore lost innocence, for no one can ever undo an act once committed. It is to lead one to a new place of integration, where the act is integrated within the larger fabric of one's moral life. However, the act of truth-telling makes one vulnerable to retaliation and judgment. The safety of the penitent one must be guaranteed by the moral and institutional authority of the one receiving the confession and by the public ritual context of the act that gives it greater importance than in another context[5].

In political processes of reconciliation following what social upheaval or trauma, the first step is always to establish the truth of individual acts. Establishing the truth about what happened provides a basis for a common memory that in turn provides a basis for a new moral order to be established. The process of establishing the truth provides a pattern of truthfulness and honesty on which any new political order must be built. It must be a public process to insure the right of all parties to contribute to a new narrative of truth. Without the validation of wider community, truth remains elusive and prone to the "narrative of the lie" perpetuated by the previous political order (Schreiter 1992, 29-39). In fact, truth-telling in a political process of reconciliation is a key strategy to "re-legitimize" language that has been co-opted by the past regime.

Between 1974 and 1994, twelve truth commissions were established following dramatic changes in the political and social order of individual nations[6]. The success of these truth commissions is related not only to how well they investigate and establish a correspondence between what happened and the memory of what happened, but in insuring the safety of those who come forward to tell the truth. To this end, who is designated to receive the truth and how the truth is delivered become critically important questions. Persons with both moral authority and institutional authority insure that the truth will be heard and the safety of those who come forward to speak the truth will be guaran-

teed. Also, speaking before an established Truth Commission is a public ritual that heightens the importance of what is said by distinguishing it from other less formal or rule-governed contexts.

Forgiveness and Repentance as Invitations to Act with Forbearance Rather than Imitate the Act of the Enemy

The Croatian scholar Miroslav Volf points out that Jesus in the Gospels preaches a message of repentance and forgiveness not just to those who are oppressed but to those who are the victims of oppression (Volf 1996, 114). Often those in the former group are instructed to turn away from greed or violence, but what exactly from what must those in the latter group repent? Volf argues that Jesus' message of repentance addressed to victims is to repent from the impulse to match the greed and violence of the oppressor. In other words, victims must repent from their envy of the wealth of the oppressor and from their desire for violent revenge when violence is perpetrated against them. Volf argues that Jesus asks victims to give up their claim against oppressors as all too often such claims mimic the dehumanizing values of the oppressors. Jesus invites victims to a change of heart towards their oppressors, to repent from their desire to oppress the oppressor, to forgive the oppressor, and to be liberated from the very oppressive values and actions that victimize them. One might consider the Gospel injunction to forgive one's enemies "not seven times…but seventy-seven times" (Lk 18:22) as a example of how repentance and forgiveness is based on a change of heart that ultimately frees the victim from the values of the oppressor and makes the victim capable of establishing a new kind of relationship with the oppressor. The victim is asked to show forbearance towards the perpetrator, not because the perpetrator is innocent, but to "make something new" through forgiveness as a sign of the kingdom come into the world.

The issues of forgiveness and repentance are thorny ones in political processes of reconciliation. Too often, the value of finding out the truth supercedes the value of those who have perpetrated crimes being asked to show evidence of remorse or repentance. In South Africa, the controversial decision to grant amnesty to those who came forward to establish their role in politically motivated criminal action continues to be fiercely debated. However, looking at it from the theological tradition, the issue of repentance goes beyond that of the perpetrator to include the victim. This does not in anyway imply the victim is responsible for his victimization or should not demand justice from those who have victimized him. We must be very clear on this. What the victim must repent of is the desire to retaliate against the perpetrator or claim superiority against the perpetrator. While the victim cannot prevent her hate of the perpetrator from beginning, she can choose not to give it nourishment; otherwise, should the opportunity present itself, they too will become oppressors. By showing forbearance and perhaps even forgiveness to-

wards their victimizers, they gain a new power in the situation and they disempower the act of the oppressor (Volf 1995, 116). In certain instances, I wonder if granting amnesty to perpetrators might serve to break the cycle of violence and temptation to violence; it shows that the new moral order will no play by the same rules of the former one. It can open the way to genuine social transformation where forgiveness rather than violence can shape a new political order[7].

Commitment to Repair and Redress (Justice) through Restored Relationship

In the familiar story of the interaction between Zachaeus and Jesus (Lk 19:8), the tax collector tells Jesus that he will pay back "four times as much" what he has cheated from the poor. Did Jesus demand such redress before he would come and stay in Zachaeus' house? No. Jesus' expressed desire to come and stay with Zachaeus occasions Zachaeus' repentance and his desire to redress the wrong he had committed. Put in theological language, the genuineness of Zachaeus' repentance is proven through his willingness to undertake penance. Is such penance necessary to for God to forgive? Absolutely not, but it is necessary for Zachaeus to create a space in his heart (and house) for those who previously he had not adequately considered. In this story, Jesus is depicted as demanding neither retributive justice (the punishment of the perpetrator) nor restorative justice (the making of a mutually agreeable redress by the perpetrator to the victim). Jesus is more concerned about sustaining a relationship with Zachaeus than in making a judgment about his past. However, in light of the care shown to him, Zachaeus comes to a judgment about his past that leads him to act decisively, even superabundantly, to fulfill the demands of justice.

In the Roman Catholic ritual tradition, a key role of the confessor came to be that of a judge, one who had to make an informed yet detached judgment about the truth of the confession and the repentance of the penitent. Such judgments were based on the content of the confession rather than personal knowledge of the penitent since the identity of the penitent was unknown. Penance was demanded as proof of the required contriteness of the penitent and was not intrinsically connected to fulfilling the demands of justice created by the sinful act of the penitent. In fact, penance came to be seen more of a punishment for sin that had to be completed not to win God's mercy, but so that the grace of forgiveness would be appropriately valued and would in no way appear "cheap". As you know, the issue of the efficacy of penance was the linchpin in Luther's protest over the sale of indulgences.

In a political context, retributive justice may be harder to accomplish yet is much "cleaner" than embarking down the messy road of restorative justice. Retributive justice simply punishes the perpetrator, usually through prison or death, and pushes him or her to the margins of society. The crime is judged to render the perpetrator so inhuman that restoration of the perpetrator back into the human community is not possible[8].

On the other hand, restorative justice leaves open the possibility that the perpetrator could fulfill the demands of justice required by the crime and, once fulfilled, resumes an equal place in the community along side of those he had formerly victimized. While both retributive and restorative models of justice take seriously the demands of justice demanded by the crime, one can argue that restorative justice alone creates a space for the perpetrator in the new moral and political order being constructed.

However, even with this model, a problem arises. Who decides what restorative redress must be done and will it ever be enough, especially for violent crimes such as murder and rape? Based on the story of Zachaeus, the Christian tradition reminds us that forgiveness implies justice, but it is a justice based first and foremost on relationship. In the words through which Jesus teaches his disciples to pray "forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Mt 6:12), justice is not overlooked. It is a part of forgiveness; something is owed to God by us (forgiving others debts) and something is owed to us by others (debts). Yet, only in the reestablishment of relationship can justice be negotiated; otherwise, the debts owed to us and our debts to God will never be paid in full (Niebuhr 1967, 49f). Only the person who is willing to forgive, to create a space for the other in her life, can pursue the demands of justice without falling into the temptation to demand restoration or punishment even at the expense of relationship with the perpetrator (Volf 1995, 122-23). As Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us, "anything short of love cannot be perfect justice" (Niebuhr 1967, 50).

Political Praxis as Instructive to Theological Praxis

Revisiting the question asked earlier in the paper, are we as theologians ready to give up our exclusive claim on reconciliation as a theological construct or, at the very least, are we agreeable to the fact that reconciliation might have political as well as theological meanings? I have attempted to argue that the very fact that reconciliation is being claimed as a political term is at least in part due to the wisdom of theological reflection and praxis. However, I also want to stress that the political praxis of reconciliation in South Africa, Chile, Guatemala and other places has highlighted aspects of reconciliation that have been under-emphasized in the Christian praxis of reconciliation. Allow me to briefly discuss three such aspects. First, reconciliation is not the same reality as forgiveness. While forgiveness is one step in a reconciliation process, it does not necessitate engagement with the perpetrator. Ultimately, it results from a decision made by the victim, an act of the will to make space for the perpetrator once more as a fellow human being. This decision is made without reference to the stance or situation of the perpetrator nor does it depend on such. The Christian theological tradition has put great emphasis on forgiveness and has tended to equate forgiveness with reconciliation. The

stress has been on seeking God's forgiveness and, to a lesser extent, the community's forgiveness of the sin by an individual penitent. However, political praxis shows us that true reconciliation has many parts and partners with forgiveness being just one aspect, albeit a necessary one, of a larger, more complex picture.

Second, the political praxis has given placed great emphasis on reconciliation as a process. Truth-telling, time for repentance and forgiveness, repair and redress, coming to regard the full humanity of the perpetrator, all of these take time and happen at different moments if they happen at all. True reconciliation between human beings cannot be modeled on the theological understanding of reconciliation between God and humanity where, based on Paul's insight, relationship is restored through the unique salvific act of Christ. While grace from this act provides humans with the ability to undertake the ministry of reconciliation, it does not reduce the hard work of reconciliation into a single encounter. So while theological praxis has given emphasis to the grace of Christ active in a reconciliatory event such as a sacramental encounter (i.e., baptism, penance, Eucharist) or the prayer of a penitent, our human experience of how reconciliation "works" does not confirm the efficacy of such single encounters. It is only through a long and difficult process involving many steps and stages through which relationships, once broken by acts of self-centeredness including violence and greed, are restored. True reconciliation, while based on the grace of a single act, does not happen in a single act. Political processes of reconciliation confirm this for us.

Third, the political praxis of reconciliation has begun a discourse about the vital role of the community in the reconciliation process. Part of truth-telling is to bring before the community those crimes that have destroyed in some way the moral fabric of the community. This connection between the act of the perpetrator and the life of the community cannot be overlooked. It is exactly this connection that calls for all the parts of a political process of reconciliation to be public. One act impacts the whole so that the whole must play a role in how the act must be redressed and the perpetrator reintegrated back into the whole. This is accomplished practically in the selection of those from the community with the moral credibility to hear the truth and act on it. It also is accomplished through the efforts and talents of many others who shepherd victims and perpetrators through the process. On the other end of the spectrum, theological praxis has come to emphasize either the private confession of sin by the penitent to either a member of the clergy or to God directly. Adequate attention has not been given to the role of the community in the reconciliation process. Theological praxis is challenged by the political praxis to look again at the practice of the early Church and to recover the active role of the community, including the development of many ministries of reconciliation, who will serve as companions on the journey towards restored relationship.

Conclusion: The (In)Adequacy of Reconciliation as a Theological and Political Term

If reconciliation describes the process of companionship/restored relationship where space for the other is made in the identity of the self, then we can locate it as both a theological and political praxis. While the term itself is being loosened from the exclusive domain of theology through its use to connote a political process, such a shift enriches the term rather than diminishes it. We see in the political praxis of reconciliation both the wisdom of the theological tradition and a challenge to expand it.

Yet, as theologians, we are led back to a fundamental question: no matter how one defines reconciliation, is it possible without divine assistance, without grace that alone has the power to transform existence from self-centeredness to other-centeredness? Given our experience of the profound human evil that we witnessed last year in my own country and for sixty years or more in this country, we cannot but be left with the conclusion that true reconciliation is not possible without the irrevocable reconciliation that has come to us in Christ. Paul's theological insight from the first century resonates with even more urgency in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. On it, we rest our hope that a final and everlasting communion between God and humans, between humans and humans, between our will and our action, between humans and the earth, will come. This hope for a New Kingdom of reconciliation will ultimately not be our work but the work of God who will make "a new heaven and new earth" (Rev 21:1). We cannot lose sight of this hope since it reminds us that all of our efforts to build communities of reconciliation must cooperate with the Spirit of reconciliation alive in our midst.

So while the political claim on reconciliation may enrich our understanding of the complexities of the process, we also are led to the inescapable theological conclusion that true reconciliation is never finished since we ourselves remain unfinished until the time when all hope will be fulfilled. As such, whether reconciliation is a theological or a political reality, it will in every instance remain non-final; even with the best of intentions and with unlimited resources, all the barriers to true and lasting reconciliation will never be fully removed (Volf 1995, 109-110). Yet the "non-finalness" of reconciliation should not cause despair as much as it should animate recommitment to the difficult work of building lives and communities of reconciliation. According to Paul, we have been given the ministry of reconciliation, a ministry that demands that we become sacraments of reconciliation to others. We must be willing to make space at the table, to be the companion of the sinner and the perpetrator as well as the innocent and the victim. Even though our efforts always will be non-final, our efforts will be guided by the vision of a reconciling embrace without limit.

Notes

1 Hannah Arendt was the first to see the religious practice of forgiveness as having political possibilities. See *The Human Condition*, 214ff.

2 All Scriptural quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

3 Mt 6:12 is another interesting example. Jesus instructs his followers to not ask for forgiveness unless they are already forgiving. This will be discussed later in the paper.

4 I rely heavily on the experience of South Africa here, but I believe the implications reach far beyond this one context.

5 Performance theory speaks of ritual "framing" where the acts performed within the frame take on special significance and so special efficacy. See Bell 1997, 159-164.

6 For an excellent summary of the work of these commissions and implications for notions of truth, justice, and responsibility, see Kritz (ed.) 1995, 225-245.

7 I recognize that this is a contested point and that victim's often experience a second victimization when perpetrators are treated too leniently.

8 It is striking how many times the metaphor of "animal" is used by victims in their testimony to South Africa's TRC to describe perpetrators. Viewing perpetrators as non-human mitigates any requirement to reincorporate them into the human community and sets the stage for retributive rather than restorative justice.