

# Truth and Reconciliation in the Church

Andrew McGowan

## Introduction

### *The Australian Church, Sexual Abuse, and Theology*

Effective action to protect the most vulnerable members of society from violence and abuse is a necessary implication of the Christian gospel, however lately and imperfectly understood. Yet the very recent arrival of what now seems an inescapable and obvious aspect of ecclesial ethics contains its own warnings. A deeply-embedded situation of denial or ignorance is not changed suddenly, or merely legislatively or institutionally. And to treat newly-established systems and the understandings associated with them as obvious or unquestionable would be to imitate the form, if not the content, of the former tragic “certainty” that long silenced the suffering of many. This already suggests a need for continued active reflection, and for scrutiny of the particular responses so far enacted.

As national bodies of the Australian Anglican Church have recognized in their deliberations about the challenges of responding to various forms of abuse and child sexual abuse in particular, there is a particular need for ongoing theological reflection. The theologies underlying actions taken so far by national and other Church bodies have been largely implicit. Although certain principles such as the need to protect the most vulnerable in Church and society at large have been clearly affirmed, to some at least the steps and statements so far have seemed more managerial than theological.<sup>1</sup>

This paper, like its companions in this journal, raises some theological issues associated with “truth and reconciliation”. This phrase is of course suggested by the South African Commission of that name. Neither truth nor reconciliation began with the Desmond Tutu-led tribunal, but they and the relationship between them have been given a new prominence in that experience and related processes of what has come to be known as of “restorative justice”.

What follows is in three parts. First is an overview of the principles of restorative justice, with particular reference to the experience and example of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A more specifically biblical exploration on “Truth” follows, with particular reference to the Gospel of John. In that section I hope to have shed some light on the important and necessary link between truth and reconciliation in more theological terms. Last, I offer some further observations on these key concepts with reference to the challenges facing the church, and to suggest how and when we may hope truth can work to promote reconciliation.

## Truth and Reconciliation

### *Restorative Justice*

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which functioned primarily between 1995 and 1998, brought to world attention not only the atrocities of the Apartheid era which it was constituted to address, but fundamental issues concerning the nature of justice and the conditions necessary for reconciliation. Although its origins and work were in some respects unique, the Commission’s activities embodied what has come to be called restorative justice, and has contributed to thinking in different settings about judicial processes and their effectiveness.

“Restorative justice” refers to a set of practices and principles now widely employed or tested in many parts of the world: in juvenile justice systems in numerous Western countries, in revived or renewed local systems for conflict resolution among indigenous peoples and in traditional cultures, and in public or

national tribunals such as those concerned with the aftermath of Apartheid in South Africa, of civil unrest in Peru, and of the Rwandan genocide. A recent initiative of particular interest to Australian Anglicans is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established by the Canadian Government as part of the Indian Residential Schools Resolution process. This instance involves a potent and painful conjunction of racism and sexual and other forms of violence involving children, with particular reference to church-run schools.

Common to most of these is a focus on the crime or injury as a breakdown of relationship within a social fabric, and consequent emphasis on the victim or victims and their needs and concerns. A characteristic element of that focus has been opportunities for those affected by crimes to speak publicly about their experience. The possibility of giving voice to the experience of suffering has proved significant in itself, as well as potentially an important step towards reconciliation or resolution. Offenders may also be given opportunities for action as participating subjects, rather than simply being made the object of either punitive or rehabilitative action. These processes have involved the telling and hearing of previously unknown stories of the crimes or injuries in question, as well as opportunities for making some form of restitution.

These processes may be contrasted, up to a point, with conventional or retributive criminal justice systems that view a crime as an offence against the law itself, and the state as the party with whom an accused person is engaged adversarially in a trial or tribunal, without necessary reference to victims. Where in the conventional case justice consists of determining and executing a sentence deemed appropriate to the offence, a “restorative” approach means that the needs and desires of the victim are inherently more significant than meting out a particular penalty on the offender, and that the damage to social relations is what must fundamentally be addressed and restored.<sup>2</sup>

The contemporary movement for restorative justice has a variety of substantial, although by no means exclusive, connections with Christian tradition and theology. Principles comparable to those of restorative justice, emphasizing restitution and reconciliation, are identifiable across the canon of Scripture, from the Mosaic Law to the Gospels. Advocates and architects of restorative justice have included numerous Christians and church-related bodies, including the Mennonite Central Committee and Prison Fellowship International. The roles taken by church members and leaders in the South African tribunal are well-known, and its Chairman referred in his memoir to the “heavily spiritual, and indeed Christian, emphasis of the Commission”.<sup>3</sup>

These connections are a further encouragement to consideration of the movement for restorative justice and some of the particular instances where it has been applied, but are not substitutes for critical examination of the theologies operative in particular instances, or of the effectiveness of such processes in obtaining just and otherwise successful outcomes for participants.

### **Truth and Reconciliation**

A remarkable feature of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the offering of amnesty to perpetrators of crimes directly related to Apartheid (and to the struggle against it) who fully and freely disclosed their participation, often in the form of confession and/or apology, with few further conditions.<sup>4</sup> Although only a small proportion of petitioners were granted amnesty, that procedure attracted some of the greatest interest, and the most strident criticism. The apology and subsequent

amnesty of former President F. W. de Klerk and the perceived failure of the Commission to provide justice to the family of activist Steve Biko were among its most controversial cases. There were also as many, or more, critics of the South African Commission who held that a complete and unconditional amnesty should have been declared, and regarded its role in bringing perpetrators to account as excessive.

These most difficult instances pose the question of what forms of reconciliation are possible and appropriate where abuses or atrocities have left lasting forms of damage to individuals or communities. Those who felt aggrieved by the apparent leniency of these processes have tended to feel that only a more “retributive” approach would amount to “justice”. These objections do not, however, invalidate the possibility that truth-telling should play some significant part in processes of reconciliation and of justice, or obviate the question of whether and how justice must involve outcomes that are positive and sustainable for the community.

In the South African case, the context of a delicately negotiated settlement for transition of power to majority rule underlined the necessity of a process that was not “victor’s justice”, but had as its end a functional society.<sup>5</sup> Where a tragedy of large proportions has occurred and/or where a situation of oppression has held sway, the ultimate goal of a process of justice must involve the whole community, as well as the positions of victims and offenders. Without this quality or scope, any process of justice risks being simply a process of cyclical retribution, where individuals or groups acquire competing historic grievances.

This further distinction between restorative justice and communal retribution has some relevance to other cases, including sexual abuse within the church. Viewing issues of sexual abuse as either “victor’s justice”, or by analogy with conventional retributive justice, risks referring both the problem and the solution to victims and perpetrators. A view which, by contrast, sees the reality of abuse as a corporate problem challenges all members of the church to accept responsibility. When difficult truths out, those concerned are not only direct abusers or oppressors but collateral beneficiaries and merely ignorant bystanders. Even where individuals are genuinely free of past blame, seeing justice as the goal of a whole community and not merely a process between accused and accusers opens the positive question of sharing responsibility for a fuller and freer future.

This shift of understanding about the character of justice has to do not merely with the common self-interest of the church and its need to fulfil its mission, but so that it may become, as a whole, a healthier and more just community. Processes that focus solely on victims or perpetrators and not on the whole social fabric of church (and society) risk making the individuals caught up in cases of abuse into scapegoats, analysis of whose specifics distracts the church from underlying causes, theological ones included, which must be addressed.

### **The Truth that sets free**

#### *In the beginning was the Truth*

The value or virtue of truth needs no defence. Yet experiences connected with restorative justice encourage asking about truth as more than correspondence between statement and fact. Theologically, truth is more than veracity or correspondence, but is ultimately related to ultimate being, to God. What is true is what is real; to speak of human knowledge of the truth, or of participation in truth as a way of human being, is to ask about relationship with God.

This sense of truth as transcendent reality is nowhere clearer than in the Gospel of John, whose narrative can be described (without fear or hope of exhausting its themes) as one of the originating truth whose purpose and promise the world bears within itself despite the reality of sin and death, and of the saving revelation and restoration of relationship between human beings and their world through the being and doing of the truth in Jesus.

Recent scholarship has elucidated the ways in which John's Gospel presents a narrative of and for the Johannine community, as well as of the history of Jesus of Nazareth and of the "all" that came into being through him.<sup>6</sup>

This narrative begins with a story of origins for each of these interwoven stories: that of the cosmos, of Jesus, of the Johannine church and of the reader. The Prologue, the history of the divine *Logos*, not just literally "Word" but also "Wisdom" or "rationality", and even "truth" (cf. 17:17; and as the Father is true; cf. 8:26).<sup>7</sup> All things are revealed as having come into being through God's Wisdom and Word, and this origin is human and cosmic truth, as well as divine reality.<sup>8</sup>

As read or "performed" in the act of reading and hearing, the Gospel also makes itself the history or narrative of the reader's own being. It reveals human origins, and offers the key to human destiny, in the course of narrating Jesus' own: "these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

### **Light and darkness**

Yet a historic disjuncture between this truth and the cosmos to which it gave rise appears quickly, in the juxtaposition of light and darkness (4-5) and then more clearly in the history of Jesus the incarnate *Logos*: "he was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him" (v.10). The cosmic and human (cf. v. 11) condition is presented as a literal "ignorance" of origin and truth, whether as cause or result. "Those who do not accept the *Logos* are those who fail to recognize their own Creator, the source of life and light, and who fail thereby to know their own identity as God's creatures".<sup>9</sup>

The pairing of seeing (light) and knowing (truth) continues through the Prologue and the Gospel: the glory of Jesus' divine reality is seen, full of grace and truth (1:14) and those who "do the truth" come to the light, so that their deeds are revealed (3:21). The same theme of light and truth is prominent in the discourse on Jesus as Light of the World (ch. 8). Jesus speaks the truth (40), and those who follow Jesus' word are "truly" his disciples; "the truth will set [them] free" (32), in contrast to the human condition of sin, which is slavery. Knowledge of this truth – of the Father, of Jesus, and hence of humankind's own origin and destiny – constitutes freedom and salvation.<sup>10</sup>

In John 14, Jesus makes the great summary statement that he is "the way, the truth, and the life" (6). These attributes all depend on the original relationship between the Father, the incarnate *Logos*, and the world into which the *Logos* has come, and all point to the promise and purpose of that coming. The "Spirit of truth" (v. 17; cf. 15:26, 16:13) likewise effects the real identity and relationship in community of those who are disciples, recalling for them (26) the truth of their origin and sanctifying them in the truth (17:17-19).

By contrast, Pilate's infamous ignorance of truth (18:37-38) confirms what had been said about those who do not "stand in the truth", and hence do not believe in Jesus (8: 43-47).<sup>11</sup> The ambiguous presentation of Pilate is an important illustration of how the power of evil and death may work. He is not presented entirely

unsympathetically, particularly in the Fourth Gospel. Pilate is nonetheless caught up in a reality of sin and death which is more profound than individual mischief; he represents and personifies that more objective, structural or ontological sense of what it is not to “stand in” or know, let alone do, the truth.

Darkness and ignorance are prominently paired among the various images used to describe and elucidate the historic human condition and the reality of sin. While Johannine dualism has been widely recognized and commented on, the evil that underlies the negative element in each of these pairings is itself not a substance or an ultimate reality in this Gospel, or otherwise in Christian faith. They are not among the “all” that came into being through the truth of the Word (cf. John 1); they are not true. The negative, rather than positive or substantial, quality of both darkness (not-light) and ignorance (not-knowledge) helps in reflecting this – evil and sin are not things in themselves with any ultimate real existence, whatever their undeniable historic reality. They are merely the absence of light and truth. This by no means mitigates the destructive and painful character and consequences of life lived without light and truth.

So the Johannine witness is not simply a claim about the correspondence between Jesus’ words and divine facts, but presents truth as both the historic answer that illuminates the human dilemma and the dynamic response that brings freedom and life. Salvation involves believing in Jesus – knowing the truth about him – and thus receiving power that reveals, and then makes real, the truth of human origins in God’s creating power and purpose.

### **The Truth that Sets Free**

This truth is relational, since the character of the universe and humanity itself is *Logos*-formed. The answer to human ignorance and cosmic darkness, which are the loss of knowledge of that origin, is the relationship formed with Jesus and among those who believe in him, which creates or restores knowledge of God from whom all things have come.

This truth is thus a dynamic reality and not merely a set of eternal correspondences. It continues to “set free” through the narration of its own truth. The becoming-flesh of the Word, who dwells among us and is seen “full of grace and truth” is not only a revelation of God’s truth but God’s effective re-narration of the story of human origin and destiny. As Irenaeus puts it, this is a new version of that ancient history, not only a narrative but a re-enactment: “God recapitulated in himself the ancient formation of humanity, that he might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify humankind” (*Adv. Haer.* 3.18.7). The nexus between truth and reconciliation lies both in the recognition of original relationship and the overcoming of ignorance, but also in the new creation of a relationship that fulfils and goes beyond what was past.

The truth of the Gospel reveals and effects this change, but not as an immediate or instant process, historically speaking. The work of the “Spirit of Truth” is the continued performance of the truth announced and embodied by Jesus, made known particularly in the church, the community of those being reconciled by the truth to their own truth. The dwelling or “abiding” of the Spirit (14:17) is analogous to, and organically linked with, the necessity of abiding in Jesus (15:4-10), an unmistakably corporate reality.

### **Telling the Truth in church**

A Christian understanding of truth – the Truth underlying other forms and performances of truth – is central for the ways in which the church is to “do the truth”, and may also have some significance for processes beyond the practice of the church such as those of restorative justice.

The telling of truth, in the senses presented by restorative justice, cannot itself be made into a substitute for the broader reality of “doing the truth”, as John’s Gospel puts it, or the wider ethical imperative that comes from deciding to seek and live truth. Truth may be found, but its pursuit is not merely a fact-finding matter – it must be sought, as a matter of choice and not only of external act.<sup>12</sup>

For the church, acknowledging that God’s performance of the truth continues through the Spirit of Truth is crucial, both as an affirmation of hope but also as a theologically-informed guard against unrealistic or misplaced expectations for immediate resolution of broken relationship. Both the historic examples of restorative justice and the Johannine theology of truth suggest that the doing of truth is a profound and at times painful thing which cannot be equated with mere statements of fact, or with easy answers to difficult questions.

The revealing of hidden (if at times horrific) truths, kept secret because of oppressive or abusive systems or of the vested interests of perpetrators, has been a prominent feature in instances of restorative justice. Oppression, it has been argued, depends on forgetfulness or on the suppression of truth.<sup>13</sup> Telling the truth in these cases means establishing knowledge where there had been ignorance (enforced, accidental or wilful), and the learning that comes from these revelations may bring with itself an opportunity for re-establishing relationships or at least moving past old hurts.

In the case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, victims’ families had long sought information about the fate of loved ones whose disappearance had simply left a mute witness to the fact of oppression.<sup>14</sup> Where the abuse of children or other vulnerable persons in institutional settings is at issue, the enforced silences have often had a different character; victims who knew the truth and sought to tell it were often dismissed or ignored. While they were aware of their own truth all too well, the reality of suffering was unacknowledged, hidden by a veil of denial and disbelief more than of active or deliberate institutional oppression.<sup>15</sup>

In both settings, the bringing to light of what had been hidden is valuable, but by implication costly also. Some facts are calamitous, and might rather be forgotten by those who experienced them, whether as perpetrators or victims.<sup>16</sup> Where families and friends have desired to learn the truth about secret executions and similar acts of violence kept hidden, truth has a capacity to heal ignorance and perhaps more, but not to provide the means for a restoration of what or who was lost through a disappearance or murder. Part of the truth, in the reality of human history, is acknowledgement of the real extent of damage and loss.

Likewise for victims of child sexual abuse, knowledge of the truth by others is also a very mixed blessing; while there can be vindication, there can also be shame. The stigma often attached to victimhood in other sexual crimes applies here also. These are additional elements of lived or historic truth which cannot be overlooked or glibly erased under misguided application of the desire for knowledge of facts.

These mitigating or complicating factors must be borne carefully in mind, both in theological reflection and in the more practical pursuit of effective processes for justice. It is worth bearing in mind Desmond Tutu’s comment that the South African Commission was intended “to *promote* not to *achieve* those worthwhile objectives [of reconciliation]”.<sup>17</sup> Tribunals and other institutional or structural remedies are not a

substitute for a deeper commitment that encompasses how the church and its members conduct themselves, prayerfully and practically.<sup>18</sup>

We need to avoid any simplistic confusion of the real and profound theological possibility of reconciliation with the concrete possibilities for restoration and renewal that apply to a particular person or situation in the immediate present. The telling of truth, as best it can be retrieved and narrated, about an instance of abuse or violence does not, in and of itself, effect the renewal or restoration of the relationship damaged, although it may be a condition of such renewal. It may also have different implications for different persons and relationships involved in the situation.

The revelation of the truth may enable the wider process of healing a social or ecclesial fabric rent by abuse or violence, but the stories of affected individuals may not follow the same path as those of communities. To affirm the liberating power of truth in the deepest sense is to claim a possibility and to assert the basis for whatever healing can take place, but must not confuse the possibility and the reality. Rather the power of the truth provides the basis on which those involved in a given situation may be empowered to take the action their situation requires. Truth includes not simply the telling of stories that reveal past events, but honest reflection on what present realities entail. The theological imperative for truth and reconciliation can inform the present situation and encourage the participants to seek honestly what is possible, but the value of reconciliation should not entail avoiding the necessity for truth.

A related distinction may be drawn between theological affirmations of redemption and forgiveness to perpetrators, and present possibilities for rehabilitation or reconciliation. Church members may be tempted apply the logic of forgiveness and reconciliation unhelpfully or simplistically to cases of clergy sexual abuse, claiming that repentance and forgiveness of sins should entail all that is needed for resumption of active ministry. This is another version of “collapse” of the necessary theological affirmation onto the immediate pastoral situation, without careful reflection or the intermediate “doing” of the truth that is fulfilled in genuine freedom.

Affirmation of the reconciling power of truth is not a basis for avoiding the pastoral responsibility that enables that truth to take such effect as it really can in the human and historic present. Rather, the acknowledgement of the whole truth of a situation of abuse or violence must lead to effective engagement with the theological hope of reconciliation. Experience tells us that it may not be possible for families to be reconstituted after forms of abuse involving family members, and uncritical claims or hopes regarding reconciliation may be unhelpful or even disastrous. So too there are circumstances in the life of the church, as much as of families or nations, where the reality of relational breakdown, particularly with regard to ministry and leadership, must be honestly admitted as a permanent feature of life as we know and live it. Christian hope can, under such circumstances, remind us that there is nonetheless an ultimate perspective where both judgement and redemption have a reality that transcends our immediate and visible experience.

*The Reverend Dr Andrew McGowan is Warden of Trinity College, and a Principal Research Fellow in Historical Studies, at The University of Melbourne.*

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As noted in the interim statement of the Doctrine Commission received by the General Synod in October 2007, and published in this collection.
- <sup>2</sup> See, for one foundational account, Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice*, Herald Press, Scottsdale, Pa, 1990.
- <sup>3</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Rider, London, 1999, p.72.
- <sup>4</sup> Remorse was not technically a requirement for amnesty, although it was often invited and in many instances offered. Other conditions included a timeframe related to the period after the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, political motivation, and a requirement of proportionality between acts and ends.
- <sup>5</sup> Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, pp.24-5.
- <sup>6</sup> See especially J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, third edition, 2003.
- <sup>7</sup> See C. H. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1953, p.178.
- <sup>8</sup> John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1991, pp.529-30
- <sup>9</sup> Dorothy Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, Crossroad, New York, 2002, p.168; and see further, pp.166-96.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. Dodd, *Interpretation*, p.176: “[Truth] therefore stands here for the realm of pure and eternal reality”.
- <sup>11</sup> On Jesus before Pilate and the Johannine presentation of truth see especially Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1996, pp.236, 264-71.
- <sup>12</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, pp.254-6.
- <sup>13</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p.236.
- <sup>14</sup> Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, pp.92-124.
- <sup>15</sup> See for instance Marie Collins, ‘Breaking the Silence: The Victims’, in *The Structural Betrayal of Trust*, R. Ammicht-Quinn, H. Haker and M. Junker-Kenny (eds), Concilium 2004/3; SCM, London, 2004, pp.13-19. On the Australian situation in general, see Muriel Porter, *Sex, Power and the Clergy*, Hardie Grant Books, Melbourne, 2003.
- <sup>16</sup> On the ambiguity of memory see also Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, pp.237-40.
- <sup>17</sup> Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, p.126 (emphasis original).
- <sup>18</sup> See further also Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, pp.20-22.