Apologising for Historic Wrongs

> 'So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift' (Matthew 5:23-24).

In Matthew 5, Jesus makes clear to his disciples that anger, acrimony, and estrangement are not things we should simply accept as ordinary parts of everyday life. We should not mistake our own anger for righteousness. Nor should we rest easy if we are the object of someone else's anger. Instead, we should drop whatever we are doing – even if we are in the midst of prayer, or worship, or some other expression of our love for and devotion to God – and make being reconciled with that person our top priority.

In the verses that follow, Jesus does not go on to spell out the steps we should take in order to bring about reconciliation. Perhaps he assumed that his listeners would know how to do that. Or perhaps he recognised that being reconciled would require different steps in different situations. Or maybe he hoped his followers would learn more about the 'how' of being reconciled by observing his life and ministry. Possibly it was all of the above. At any rate, in the intervening centuries the practice of offering an apology has become a key part of the process of seeking reconciliation.

Over the past year the Theological Forum has reflected on what an apology is and when and how one should apologise. These reflections were prompted by a request made to the Church of Scotland in 2021 by an organisation called Remembering the Accused Witches of Scotland who are seeking an apology from the Church for its contribution to the prosecution and persecution of those accused of practicing witchcraft in Scotland in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries.

Our reflections begin with the kinds of apologies with which we have the most experience and where our understanding of the practice is clearest, namely apologies made by one individual to another. We then turn to consider what difference it makes when an apology is being offered by a group for offences that predate any of the group's current members.

I. Personal Apologies

Characteristically, an apology is called for when one party (call her Anna) has taken offence or has suffered harm she did not deserve as a result of another party's actions (call him Ben). Ben's apology should acknowledge the offence or the harm Anna suffered and his contribution thereto. It should also express the right kinds of attitudes toward the suffering and his responsibility for it. This will involve sympathising with Anna and expressing guilt, shame, remorse, or at the very least regret for his role in it. (Which emotions are fitting will depend on the nature of the harm or offence and Ben's contribution thereto.) These emotional responses matter because they show that Ben recognises the costs his actions imposed on Anna and that she did not deserve to bear them. They also show that he cares about Anna and other members of the moral

community, about the norms that govern their life together, and about his responsibility to affirm and uphold those norms.

The description offered in the previous paragraph is of what we might call the basic model of apology. As with automobiles, there are various upgrades that could be added to improve the basic model. The most obvious add-on is repentance or some other indication that Ben does not intend to impose this same cost on Anna – or other members of the moral community – again. Some might balk at calling repentance an add-on.[1] After all, repentance is one of the features that recipients (and witnesses) of apologies care about most. Indeed, without it, many apologies will fail to fulfil their function. Before Anna goes back to trusting Ben again, she may well be looking for some indication that Ben is not likely to repeat the infraction next week or next month. And repentance is one such indicator, since it involves repudiating one's prior actions and attitudes and committing oneself to a new and better course. However, repentance is not always an option, even for well-meaning agents. There can be tragic circumstances in which Ben is forced to choose between two options, both of which are objectionable, and the situation may be such that Ben and Anna both know Ben will be forced to make this choice again. There can also be situations, such as when the moral failing in question is tied to an addiction or a deeply-rooted character flaw, where Ben and Anna both know Ben is likely to mess up in exactly this way again at some point. In such situations, a meaningful apology need not pretend that the future looks rosier than we have reason to think it really will be.[2] Even in such circumstances, Ben's apology needs to acknowledge that he has fallen short, Anna deserved better, and Anna's welfare – and that of others who might have been affected – matters to him. But other things being equal, apologies that express repentance are significantly better than ones that do not.

Another add-on that can improve the quality of an apology – and whose absence can detract from it – is an attempt to make amends. If Ben is still driving the car he stole from Anna and has no plans to return it, then it will be impossible to take his apology seriously, no matter how well-worded it might be, how much he appears to sympathise with Anna's plight, or how openly he acknowledges his fault. For his apology to have a chance of helping to reconcile him to Anna, Ben will also need to return her car. But if, in addition to returning the car, Ben also seeks to compensate Anna for the personal inconvenience and emotional distress she has suffered as a result of his actions, the value of Ben's apology will be enhanced. His attempts to make amends underscore the sincerity of his apology and alleviate (at least some of) the unjust burden his original actions had imposed on Anna.[3]

There are a number of other factors that bear on when an apology will be conducive to reconciliation. These factors are not limited to what Ben says to Anna about this particular misdeed. If Ben has disrespected Anna, lied about her to her friends, and vandalised her home, and he only apologises for disrespecting her, neither Anna nor anyone else is likely to view his apology favourably. Similarly, if Ben has wronged Anna, Cynthia, and Dudley in exactly the same way, but he only apologises to Anna, that is likely to have a bearing on the value of his apology. What we don't apologise for is often

[1] See, for example, Aaron Lazare, *On Apology* (Oxford University Press, 2004) 229-230.
[2] Glen Pettigrove and Jordan Collins, 'Apologizing for Who I Am,' *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 28 (2011): 137-150.
[3] Linda Radzik, *Making Amends: Atonement in Morality, Law, and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

as important as what we do. One reason this is the case is that apologies are not just about the past. They are also about the kinds of present and future relations others might hope to have with Ben. And what he doesn't say can often tell us as much about what he is like as what he does say.

II. Group Apologies

If we turn our attention to wrongs or injuries caused by a group, we would expect a good group apology to contain the same basic elements a personal apology would. The group apologising should acknowledge the wrong they did or the harm their actions caused. They should express sympathy with the victim and regret or remorse for contributing to their injury (or failing to come to their defence in the case of sins of omission). If repentance is appropriate, then expressing repentance would make the group's apology better. The same is true of attempting to make amends. The basic contours of a good apology, then, are the same for a group as for an individual.

However, the fact that an apology is being offered by a group does introduce some additional layers of complexity. One such layer has to do with the way guilt is distributed in a group. Occasionally, guilt is evenly distributed to each member of a group. Even though only one of the bank robbers took the money out of the vault, one threatened the bank employees, and one kept the engine running in the getaway car, we consider each of them guilty of the robbery in its entirety. They were all aware of what they collectively were doing, and each was playing their part to contribute to the success of the operation. But most cases are not like the bank heist. Typically, guilt is unevenly distributed across a group's members. Some members (e.g., the CEO and CFO) were more responsible for the group's wrongdoing than others (e.g., the janitor who was unaware the company was doing wrong). In contexts where guilt is unevenly distributed, it may be important for the apology to reflect that fact.

Another layer of complexity is due to differences in the way groups and individuals have emotions and perform actions. A remorseful individual feels remorse and expresses that emotion in actions that reflect sadness at what they've done and a wish that they had behaved differently. When we ascribe an emotion like remorse to a group, much more of the weight of that ascription will be carried by the group's actions. It may be important for some group members to feel remorse over what they individually and collectively have done. But it will be even more important that they act in ways consistent with remorse by, for example, altering company policies and institutional values, changing the way the company is organised, introducing new kinds of oversight, and taking other steps to ensure the group behaves better from now on.[4]

Changing institutional structures introduces an additional layer of complexity to group apologies. When an individual apologises for her own actions, she often adopts a fiction of splitting herself in two. She separates her current self from her former self. Her former self behaved badly, but she is no longer that person. Her current self stands in solidarity with the victim of her former self's actions, condemning those actions as wrong.[5] As she does so, it is acceptable for the apologiser to castigate her former self: 'I

[4] Glen Pettigrove and Nigel Parsons, 'Shame: A Case Study of Collective Emotion,' *Social Theory and Practice* 38 (2012): 504-530.

[5] Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public* (Basic Books, 1971) 113.

was really horrible, but I've seen the error of my ways and now I stand with you in condemning who I was and what I did.' In group apologies, however, this familiar feature of personal apologies is often not a fiction. The persons most responsible for the group's failing have been sacked or demoted and those presenting the apology are people who were not involved in the group's misdeeds. This fact has certain benefits. It makes it easier to convince both the victim and the wider community that the former wrongdoer has changed and can be relied upon not to reoffend. But it also introduces risks. What presents itself up as a group apology might come across as (or really amount to) one individual casting aspersions on another. Instead of a group owning up to their moral failings, what others hear is one part of the group (for example, the new management) vilifying another part (e.g., the old management).[6] And that often sounds less like taking responsibility for what happened than it does like redirecting blame to someone else.

III. Group Apologies for Historic Wrongs

One thing groups are able to do that individual persons are not is apologise for wrongs that took place more than a century ago. Some people have misgivings about apologies for historic wrongs. These misgivings are rooted in questions about agency and blame. We shall consider and respond to the most common misgivings before turning to the value of historic wrongs.

The most frequently voiced objection to apologies for historic wrongs begins with the thought that the point of an apology is to accept the blame for some misdeed.[7] To this it adds two further thoughts. First, it is unfair to blame someone for misdeeds performed by someone else.[8] Second, it is inappropriate to accept blame for someone else's wrongdoing.

The first objection is built on several assumptions we might want to challenge. At least in its early days our tradition had a much less individualistic perspective on moral responsibility than the objection assumes. For example, in explaining how seriously Yahweh takes idolatry, the Deuteronomist tells us Yahweh is 'a jealous God, punishing children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generations of those who reject me' (Deuteronomy 5:9). The Deuteronomist does not have the final word in this issue. Ezekiel 18 defends a more individualistic conception of moral responsibility. Nevertheless, one might push back against the assumption that an individual is only rightly blamed for an action she personally did. However, even if one accepted the assumption that it is unfair to blame someone for another person's misdeeds, there would still be a compelling reason to set the objector's concerns to one side. Not all apologies – not even all good apologies – are about accepting blame. This is true of personal apologies: a parent can apologise to her neighbour for the window her children broke when playing ball in the garden without anyone thinking she is to blame for the broken window. The point is even clearer when we look at group apologies. Sometimes what makes a group apology meaningful is that it is a way for the group to stand in solidarity with victims. Sometimes it is meaningful because it is a way for the group to affirm its current commitment to communal norms that the group previously

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[6] C.S. Lewis, 'The Dangers of National Repentance,' *The Guardian* (15 March 1940).
[7] Nick Smith, *I Was Wrong: The Meanings of Apologies* (Cambridge University Press 2008) 34.
[8] Samuel Wheeler, III, 'Reparations Reconstructed,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1997): 301-318.

breached. Sometimes a group apology is meaningful because it is a way for the group to take responsibility for what innocent others suffered as a consequence of the group's previous actions. And each of these could be done without anyone casting, accepting, or even invoking blame.

A second objection is also concerned with blame, but this time with the blame of the group's former members rather than its current ones. The worry is about whether it is appropriate to apply contemporary standards to past actors. For example, many current members of the Church of Scotland will think one of the things that made the witch hunts of yesteryear so horrifying is that most – possibly all – of the accused were innocent of the charges laid against them. This may be because we think the accused could not have made a deal with the devil or because, if they did, the devil is not capable of granting humans the sorts of magical powers James VI accused them of deploying against him. It may be because we think many of the accused simply suffered from mental health conditions that were poorly understood at the time. It may be because we think some of the accused were just ahead of their time, having stumbled upon medicinal properties of plants that were not yet widely known. It may be because we think testimony that has been acquired through torture, the threat of torture, or the offer of reprieve is unreliable. It may be because the power dynamics displayed in the witch trials were so manifestly sexist.[9] Or it may be because we do not think consorting with faeries is a capital offence. As a result of some combination of these beliefs, we might think all church members involved in advocating anti-witchcraft laws and accusing, trying, condemning, or executing people for witchcraft behaved badly. But by their lights, they were trying to rid Scotland of evildoers who were engaged in what they believed was treasonous or idolatrous activity. Were we in a position to ask them, they would tell us they were trying to protect innocent people from Satan and his wiles, they were showing their loyalty to the king, they were correcting the frailty women had inherited from Eve,[10] and they were expressing pious devotion to God. Surely it is unfair to blame them for piety, patriotic loyalty, or benevolent concern for public welfare. Nor is it fair to blame them for failing to understand aspects of human psychology or pharmacology that the scientific community would not understand until generations hence.

Legitimate concerns stand behind this line of thought. It is important not to misconstrue the motivations of our forebears, not least because we are a lot like them and need to be alert lest we repeat their mistakes. It does not do anyone any good if an apology oversimplifies the moral landscape, either by making us look better than we are or making our predecessors look worse than they were. However, it is also important not to ignore the ways in which earlier generations could and should have known better. There were dissenting voices in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries who cautioned against self-righteous arrogance and sanctimonious cruelty. There were numerous factors that highlighted the limitations of our knowledge and that warned of the dangers of overconfidence. Jesus' own repeated rejection of misogynistic norms should have prompted those who claimed to follow his example to question a practice that was

[9] More than five times as many women were accused of practicing witchcraft in Scotland as men (Julian Goodare, 'Women and the Witch-Hunt in Scotland,' *Social History* 23 (1998): 288-308).
[10] King James, VI, *Daemonologie* [1597], in *Minor Prose Works*, J. Craigie, ed. (Scottish Text Society 1982) 30.

so obviously skewed against women.[11] The list could go on. And similar factors bear on many of the historic acts for which a centuries-old organisation like the Church of Scotland or the Church of England might consider apologising, including complicity with the injustices of slavery, imperialism, and racism. The 'lack of knowledge' that might be pleaded on behalf of our forebears was often worse than mere ignorance. It was wilful self-deception.

In short, the wrongdoing of a group's earlier members may be both less and more familiar than is commonly acknowledged. That fact speaks in favour of approaching both previous and current actions of the group with circumspection and doing our research carefully before we apologise for historic wrongs. But since apologies are not just – or even necessarily – about assigning and accepting blame, there is scope for an apology to serve its function even if it gets some of the historical details wrong. It is possible to stand in solidarity with the victims and affirm current community standards even if we have not determined who all the bad actors were, what motivated them, and whether they should have known better.

A third worry regarding apologies for historic wrongs is rooted in questions about whether a current group is the same agent as the one who acted badly. In addition to the change of membership already mentioned, there are also factors like group mergers and schisms. The present Church of Scotland, for example, was formed from the merger of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church of Scotland in 1929. And the United Free Church was formed from the merger of the United Presbyterian Church and the Free Church of Scotland a generation earlier (in 1900). If the present Church of Scotland regrets something the United Presbyterian Church did, or that the pre-schism Church of Scotland did, does it have the standing to apologise for that action?

While schisms and mergers might have a bearing on the Church's liability in a court of law, it is less clear that they are relevant to the matter of the Church's moral responsibility. One's thoughts on the matter will depend in no small part on the metaphors one employs. If we are thinking of the issue in terms of guilt or blame, and we think of guilt as functioning like a financial debt, then schisms might mean responsibility for pre-schism wrongdoing is now shared among the various post-schism denominations (call them D1, D2, and D3). If D1 and D2 merge, forming a new group (D4), then one might think D4 has a greater share of responsibility for pre-schism wrongdoing than D1 did (because it has inherited D1's and D2's guilt like it would inherit their other assets or debts). If, on the other hand, one is concerned about affirming one's commitment to community standards, about aligning one's tradition more closely with justice, and about making victims whole, then the financial metaphor is less attractive and the schisms and reunifications less relevant. When Pope John Paul apologised for the crusades, for example, he did not seem terribly worried about the implications of the Papal Schism of 1378-1417 or the Protestant Reformation. Nor should he have been. That history was irrelevant to the moral, historical, and relational aims of his apology.

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[11] See Ben Witherington, III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge University Press, 1987); Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Orbis Books, 1994); and Susan Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel* (T&T Clark, 2004).

The final worry we will consider has to do with the ongoing agency of the victim of a historic wrong. One characteristically apologises to someone for having failed them in some respect.[12] If a group wishes to apologise for a centuries-old wrong, to whom should their apology be directed? In cases like the witch trials, all of the primary victims are dead. So are the secondary victims, namely, the family and friends who were also wronged when their loved one was accused, condemned, and executed for being a witch. Nor were the victims part of an institution that might be seen as a collective victim that has persisted to the present day.

If an apology had to start with 'We did you wrong,' then this worry would be a show-stopper for some would-be apologisers. But not all meaningful apologies need begin that way. An apology might need to be at least notionally addressed to someone, but that someone need not be the victim. A group that is advocating the cause of innocent victims could be a suitable addressee. In a case like the Scottish witch-hunts – more than 84% of whose victims were women – one might address the apology to women, whose exposure to various forms of misogyny, gender inequality, and gender-based violence provides a meaningful link between their experiences and those of so many of the accused witches of the past.

Having dealt with a number of common misgivings, let us finally turn to the matter of why a group might wish to issue an apology for historic wrongs. Several reasons have already been mentioned: expressing respect for and solidarity with victims, affirming one's commitment to justice and neighbourliness. Another reason is to set the historical record straight. Apologies for historic wrongs, 'set the record straight by correcting official accounts and acknowledging groups … whose existence was denied or near-eradicated. They represent and even enact important public moral change by asserting the wrongness of past norms and policies (for example, racist immigration practices or genocidal colonialism) that were once considered acceptable or even morally appropriate, and they announce and assert the very real harms these wrongful policies caused.'[13]

A third reason for apologising for historic wrongs becomes salient if we return to the remarks of Jesus with which we started. For many within our community, when they think of the church they think of an organisation with a history of bad behaviour: they think of racism, sexism, homophobia, greed, hypocrisy, inquisitions, witch-hunts, crusades, religious bigotry, sectarianism, social exclusion, child abuse cover-ups, complicity with imperialism, siding with the powerful against the vulnerable, and the like. They think of our worst qualities at our worst moments. And given how bad we have been at those moments – and how imperfect we remain even at our best – they quite reasonably have something against us. Issuing an apology for our historic sins can be an important step toward reconciling with neighbours from whom the church's past has alienated her. If accompanied by supporting actions, such an apology can help persuade our neighbours they can expect better of us in future.

A further benefit of apologising for historic wrongs is that issuing such an apology invites us to scrutinise our current actions, values, institutional structures, and group

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[12] Janna Thompson, 'Apologizing for Historical Injustices,' *Social Research* 87 (2020) 1039.
[13] Alice MacLachlan, '"Trust Me, I'm Sorry": The Paradox of Public Apology,' *The Monist* 98 (2015) 442.

dynamics to see whether – and to what extent – we might be at risk of repeating past failures. One of the ways in which confession can be good for the soul is by forcing us to take a long, hard look both at who we have been and who we are now. And taking this look may draw things to our attention that we have been overlooking. One thing we might notice is that we continue to benefit from some of our past misdeeds.[14] Glasgow's economy in the 18th and early 19th centuries, for example, was dependent on the slave trade. Given that fact, it is bound to be the case that the church received money from parishioners which had been acquired directly or indirectly as a result of slave labour. Insofar as Glasgow's economy in the 19th century was dependent on Britain's colonisation of Africa, India, Australia, and New Zealand, there are likely to be benefits the church has enjoyed that were originally acquired by unjust means, even if the injustice was not the church's doing. In each case, at least some of the bequests and buildings funded in this way have been inherited by the present Church of Scotland. So we continue to benefit from church members' past injustices. And insofar as the church knew that some of the money it received was unjustly acquired but chose to bite its tongue and accept the cheque, we continue to benefit from the church's past misdeeds. Apologising for historic wrongs can draw our attention to issues like these and can help open the door to better ways of being the church in the future.

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[14] Glen Pettigrove, 'Apology, Reparations, and Question of Inherited Guilt,' *Public Affairs Quarterly* 17 (2003): 319-348.