

“If these were silent, the stones would shout out”

Truth commissions and Anabaptism in dialogue

César Moya

Societies divided by high-intensity conflict pose challenges to the church in its understanding and practice of discipleship as a political responsibility. The church has often chosen to avoid this responsibility by keeping silent before victims’ justice claims. Such silence contrasts with ethical proposals articulated outside religious institutions, yet the contents of these proposals—such as those found in truth commission reports—are close to those of Christian discipleship.

My intent is to demonstrate that fundamental aspects of following Christ are implicit in truth commission reports, and that their ethical content is linked closely with discipleship as seen in an Anabaptist perspective. I have taken into account the reports

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of truth commissions in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Peru, and have compared them with the Anabaptist ethical-theological perspectives of John Howard Yoder, John Driver, and John Paul Lederach.

The first part of this article will identify in summary fashion some general convergences between these truth commission reports and the thought of the Anabaptist writers named above. The second will compare the practical contents of discipleship in these two sets of

sources. In the last part, I will identify some challenges for the church in the area of discipleship as a political responsibility in divided societies. My hope is to contribute to dialogue about rethinking discipleship.

Convergences in ethical perspective

Before noting convergences between truth commission reports and Anabaptism, we should bear in mind two things: First, the

truth commission reports are not written explicitly from the perspective of Christian faith, although they contain some ethical elements that align with biblical understandings of the God of life, peace, and justice. Second, Anabaptist ethics is explicitly Christ-centered; Yoder, Driver, and Lederach regard as relevant—to our world, in this time—the social and political ethic of Jesus as that ethic is described in scripture.

A first convergence I discern is that these two sets of ethical perspectives promote and defend life, peace, justice, truth, freedom, human rights, and reconciliation. They thus reject oppression, exclusion, marginalization, militarization—and all action rooted in structures, systems, and powers that violate human dignity.

A second convergence is that the two sets of perspectives respond to violence and arise from post-war contexts. The truth commission reports deal with social, economic, political, and cultural aspects of specific diverse and heterogeneous societies. For this reason they understand reconciliation as a complex process, ranging from the individual and the group to the collective. They seek the establishment of a society founded on a new social and political pact. Anabaptism reinterprets its ethical principles of the sixteenth century for today by emphasizing the concept of an alternative community—an ecclesial community, in particular. In this community a certain homogeneity of thought and a commitment to the ethics of Christian discipleship and peacemaking are evident.

A third convergence: the two sets of sources put forward nonviolent ethical proposals that come from groups who are uncomfortable with the status quo, and who initially looked for social transformation through the use of force. The strategy of seeking justice through violent means, both in the context of sixteenth-century Anabaptism and in the context of the respective countries of these truth commissions, failed and generated more violence, leaving countless victims.

A fourth convergence: the two sets of perspectives build their ethical proposals with reference to the state. In the truth commission reports the state is identified as a direct perpetrator of the majority of acts of violence and violations of human rights. The Anabaptist writers make a clear distinction between the state, as

part of “the world,” and Christians (“the church”); the state (in their view) is incapable of having a full-fledged commitment to nonviolence and reconciliation, although the state (like everything else) is under the sovereignty of God.

A fifth convergence: in both sets of sources violence is taken as the starting point for the ethical proposal. The ethics of the truth commission reports grows out of a commitment that emerged in the context of war, as part of an agreement between the parties to the conflict. The ethics of Yoder, Driver, and Lederach arise from the experience of sixteenth-century Anabaptists, who suffered cruel violence inflicted by the state with the assent of other Christian groups. The two sets of proposals see not only war but also other forms of violence as enemies of peace; for the truth commissions, violence violates human dignity, and for Anabaptism violence is seen as contrary to the teachings and life of Christ.

Convergences on the practical contents of discipleship

Anabaptist sources and truth commission reports have similar understandings about truth: truth is based on facts, which—although painful—need to be known not only by the victims and

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offenders but by the community as well. The community, using moral discernment, exposes the truth. This process brings catharsis—release—for those who live with the aftermath of violence: it helps in identifying and assessing society’s values; it helps uncover the causes of violence; it is paradoxical, which means that it articulates ideas and lifts up seemingly contradictory forces in order to bring to light what really happened. For

Anabaptism, perjury has no place in the community. Truth is not to be manipulated; letting one’s yes be yes is characteristic of Jesus’ disciples.

In addition, telling the truth brings risks to one’s life and integrity. This is an intrinsic part of the cost of discipleship—as in Anabaptism—and of an ethic that promotes reconciliation—as in the commissions. Telling the truth, even in the course of taking statements about victims in ordinary courts, sometimes brings disastrous consequences.

Discipleship, justice, and reparation. The truth commission reports and Anabaptism seek to strengthen community through the practice of justice. They respect the life and integrity of others. For Anabaptism, it is justification in Christ that establishes a new humanity.

The two sets of sources see truth as necessary to achieving justice and reconciliation. For Anabaptism, the practice of justice is also linked to mercy and forgiveness. Both for the truth commissions and for the Anabaptist sources, justice has to do with restoration and with the sociopolitical realm. Anabaptism does not explicitly emphasize reform of institutions, but the practice of solidarity in social relationships takes into account the sociopolitical context.

Furthermore, reparation is closely related to the practice of justice. While the truth commissions emphasize justice as punishment of offenders and reparation and restoration for victims, Anabaptism emphasizes restoration of the offender. While the truth commissions see the state as responsible for reparations, Anabaptism considers the whole community the locus of the restoration process. The church, as a community where Christ is proclaimed and obeyed as Lord, has authority to restore offenders and speak words of forgiveness and reconciliation to them. And as we noted with respect to the search for truth, the search for justice is costly; it has a price.

Also, the two sets of ethical proposals coincide in seeing justice as entailing an appropriate redistribution of goods in the community; both value social justice and equity. In addition, the practice of justice is linked to the covenant the community makes.

The most notable difference between the two sets of ethical proposals is that in the truth commissions the judicial element establishes the concept of justice. For Anabaptism, on the other hand, human societal justice is understood in relation to divine justice. In this sense, justice has to do with acts of liberation and protection, freedom from slavery, and care for people who are weak or in poverty. It also has to do with generosity and honesty between brothers and sisters. It has to do with salvation, which is expressed tangibly in a new reality. In other words, it is a restorative justice that does not condemn but instead restores and frees both the victim and the perpetrator.

Discipleship, repentance, and conversion. For the truth commissions and Anabaptism, repentance and conversion have to do with transforming a way of thinking. This process entails changes in attitudes and actions. These changes involve recognizing the harm that has been done, asking for forgiveness, assuming responsibility, and seeking the restoration of victims. The differences between the two ethical proposals are also in focus: truth commissions look primarily at institutional actions of the state and of those who were guerrillas. The weapons on all sides must be put down, reforms in the state apparatus must be instituted, and charges or penalties against or all who were involved in the

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violence must be dismissed. For the Anabaptist thinkers, the process of change involves social and personal dimensions; focus on these aspects of the process is crucial to moving from destructive and violent conflict to constructive conflict, to peace and reconciliation, and to following Christ in a restorative community.

Although the truth commission reports do not explicitly mention following Christ as the way to repentance and conversion, we can see a resemblance between the actions

required of institutions (assuming responsibility and making reparation to victims) and the practice of Jubilee, as a political platform of Jesus, which is emphasized by the above-named Anabaptist writers.

Discipleship and forgiveness. The two sets of proposals have a similar understanding of forgiveness: It is the opposite of condemnation. It is a grace given by the victim to the perpetrator. It is different from reconciliation but is an important path to reconciliation, because it is focused toward the future and looks to remedy past wrongs and restore relationships. It is an act of internal health and release.

Neither set of perspectives wants to promote the idea that people can do wrong with impunity, but there are differences between them. The truth commissions grant amnesty—elimination of criminal responsibility—as a pardon, but they do not neglect the damage offenders have done. In this way amnesty

contributes to reconciliation. For Anabaptism, amnesty has value within the act of forgiveness, but this is distinct from granting exemption from any penalty. In this sense, amnesty enables a new beginning for individuals, groups, and society. In addition, Anabaptism, in contrast with the truth commissions, emphasizes forgiveness as part of the grace and mercy of God: it shows a deep concern for the offender, because the reconciliation process is focused on relationships and looks toward the future more than the past.

Discipleship and reconciliation. The two ethical proposals agree on the importance of the links between people. But for the Anabaptist, reconciliation also means restoration of relationship with God and creation that comes through the work of Christ on the cross. Despite this difference, the truth commissions recognize that reconciliation has to do with the abolition of social, economic, political, racial, cultural, and gender discrimination. This ethic finds parallels in an Anabaptist interpretation of Ephesians 2:14–16.

Reconciliation for the truth commissions is focused on relationships within society and with the state. For the Anabaptist writers, in contrast, Christian ethics are for Christians and do not apply directly and immediately to the state as an institution.

The two sets of sources agree that reconciliation produces some new links: the truth commissions emphasize that state reforms are needed as well as a new social and political pact, and Anabaptism conceives of a rearrangement in the social, economic, and political worlds—a new humanity and a new creation through the work of Christ. For both sets of ethical proposals, reconciliation is evident in community. The absence of community for the truth commissions is presented as one of the constraints on reconciliation. For the Anabaptists, the community is evidence of reconciliation; in it there should be no discrimination of any kind, and goods should be shared. Within the community there should be no people in poverty and no distrust of one another, and the community should give attention to the social demands of those who are in need. The main difference is that while for the truth commissions reconciliation is limited to the social arena, for Anabaptism it is a comprehensive event, which includes environmental justice. On the other hand, the truth

commissions are explicit in saying that discrimination against women and gender inequity limit reconciliation, while Anabaptism is not explicit on this issue.

Discipleship and sustainable peace. The concepts of peace and reconciliation in the reports of the truth commissions are always integrated. They cannot deal with one concept without taking the other one into consideration. The two concepts are separate in Anabaptism. Peace is understood by Anabaptism as a holistic event, but at the same time it is a dynamic process in which justice can be achieved without violence. This peace is expressed in economic conversion, absolute renunciation of war, liberation from fear, and as a new social order. Also, for Anabaptism, peace is a mystery and a vocation that has costs for those who work for it. To build peace requires a structure, an analysis of the conflict process, attention to relationships, and resources and coordination of efforts to support it.

Ethical proposals for reconciliation, such as those found in the reports of these truth commissions, challenge the church to consider its responsibility in societies divided by conflict.

Discipleship implies political responsibility

We have seen that fundamental aspects of following Christ are embedded in ethical proposals of the truth commission reports, and that the contents of these reports are closely related to discipleship understood in an Anabaptist perspective. Still, we should keep in mind that the ethical proposals of these truth commissions emerged as a political responsibility arising out of high-intensity conflict that divided their respective societies.

Ethical proposals for reconciliation, such as those found in the reports of these truth commissions, challenge the church. In particular, they challenge the church to consider its responsibility in societies divided by conflict. They challenge the church to reconsider and revitalize its understanding and practice of discipleship. They challenge the church to promote a discipleship of political responsibility in divided societies. They challenge the church to be permanently vigilant in compliance with truth commission peace agreements and to participate actively in reformulating the social and political pacts of society. They

challenge the church to invite its members to conscientiously object to war while serving the state in ways that are based in practices of nonviolence. They challenge the church to raise awareness in society about current events. They challenge the church to guide the present and the future, to be a prophetic voice every time governments proclaim a false peace. They challenge the church to do away with notions of cheap grace and a gospel of prosperity. They challenge the church to practice solidarity, to maintain its independence from the state, and to promote a culture of peace.

Practicing truth and reconciliation, justice and reparation, repentance and conversion, forgiveness and peace, among other constituent aspects of Christian discipleship, does not guarantee a comfortable life. On the contrary, those who follow this path—whether in a conscious way or not—have suffered persecution, exile, torture, disappearance, and martyrdom. This is the cost of a discipleship that takes political responsibility. Christians following Jesus dare not neglect the realm of politics. If they are silent in the face of this responsibility, God will use others: after all, if these are silent, the stones themselves will shout out (Luke 19:40).

About the author

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