

Session Two: Christian Theology/Church History
 RESPONSE TO OLGA DRUZINHINA AND DAVIDE CANTARELLA

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It is a pleasure to be invited to respond to these two interesting papers, which touch and diverge at various points as they trace this common theme of reconciliation. Olga Druzhina, guiding us through Basil of Caesarea's moral and theological vision of the Christian community; and Davide Cantarella, raising questions about the 'powers' in relation to the Church's task of reconciliation. These papers do not run in neat parallel, but are like two trees standing near each other. Each is tall and proud and one could quite easily spend all day in the boughs of just one, but at points the branches reach out and bump up against each other. It is one of these touches that I would like to examine in this response.

The most obvious obstacle before us in facilitating this discussion about reconciliation is that this is an international gathering. "Reconciliation" will conjure up different images for each of us. As we attempt to speak about it, we will find that we speak different languages. Though the words might be the same, the *meaning* differs as we each try to find a place where we can communicate clearly. How are we to identify the location where "reconciliation" can be spoken of with clarity of all involved? Both Druzhina and Cantarella celebrate the Church as the site of reconciliation, the place where we can speak a common language.

The claim that reconciliation occurs in the church must to some extent be true. The church does appear to participate in the redemptive work of God in the world. But this very claim raises questions about *meaning*, one of which I would like to put to Cantarella's paper. Cantarella describes the church as a "catalyst of human transformation" and "an instrument of cosmic reconciliation." These are heady roles. Given that Cantarella makes significant use of William Stringfellow's writing, I wonder about the extent to which Stringfellow's concern about idolatry and the powers has really penetrated Cantarella's ecclesiology. Reconciliation is indeed an element of the fabric of Stringfellow's ecclesiology, but Stringfellow's church does not *work* reconciliation—it witnesses to it.¹ Even in this more modest agency, Stringfellow observes a distinction between the Church and church institutions. It is these institutions—churches and their ministries—that are corruptible and potential death-dealing powers. The Church exists by the gift of God, and yet churches frequently seek some sense of purpose, and with purpose comes a thirst for survival. It is this very concern with preserving the ongoing functionality of the institution as an end in itself, that Stringfellow diagnoses as demonic.² Idolatry, Stringfellow argues, is that which "renders the existence of the idolater morally significant, morally worthwhile."³ Are we not dancing dangerously close to this precipice when we entrust the task of reconciliation to the church—particularly if we mean by that the particular instantiation of the local Christian gathering? Cantarella writes, "The community of those who follow the Crucified One is the ordained structure through which reconciliation will occur." Is the church really up to

¹ William Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 102.

² Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 56.

³ William Stringfellow, *Imposters of God: Inquiries into Favourite Idols* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 6.

the task? As I read this, I was reminded of Fleming Rutledge's argument that we need to learn to "make God the subject of active verbs."⁴ She argues that we need to learn to avoid sentences such as "We are all on a faith journey", and recover language such as "God has sought us and found us"; or, for our purposes, "God is reconciling the world to himself."⁵

Perhaps "witnessing" to God's reconciliatory work sounds a little weak. We could spend time unpacking the concept a little, but being short of time I instead simply point to Barth's *Dogmatics* and Donald Mackinnon's suggestion that the future of the church might lie in the *kenosis* of establishment.⁶

Druzhina's paper takes inspiration from Basil's theology to sketch an image of the church as a community of spiritual and social reconciliation. I do have suspicions that "reconciliation" might not quite be the right description for Basil's vision of the church's work in the world. His rhetoric is rarely so peaceful when pressing his parishioners on social issues. Rather than advocating reconciliation, he decries the lack of love on display. "If you had truly loved your neighbour," he writes, "it would have occurred to you long ago to divest yourself of... wealth. But now your possessions are more a part of you than the members of your own body."⁷ And his writings against Eunomius and the Apollinarians rarely have much of a reconciliatory tone.

The church, she argues, is to "reverse all the negative consequences of human disobedience to God's will." This, again, is a lofty task for the church, and some of the questions that I have asked of Cantarella I also ask of Druzhina. How are we defining "church" here? Are we thinking of the local congregation, or of the more fundamental universal church that embraces and includes congregations and structures both past and present? Are we thinking here of the universal church—both mystical and historical—that spans from heaven to earth with the glorified and the not-so-glorified worshipping their lord together?

Rowan Williams shows us the difficulty of being a reconciled community for the world. Drawing from Wittgenstein's observation that happy people and tormented people occupy different worlds—both linguistically and in outlook—Williams shows that the presence of the happy to the "truly unhappy" can cruelly add to the torment of the latter. "A church which sets great store by tangible fulfilment, spiritual security, hopes satisfied, is bound to be like this—a warm little house on an enormous black moor, inside, warm and content, outside, weeping and loss, intensified by the presence of the happy little haven."⁸ Can the church avoid aggravating anxiety and still be a witness to reconciliation? Where we think we can, we again border on idealism. Stringfellow's voice is summoned up: the church is not "some esoteric, separatist,

⁴ Fleming Rutledge, "Sentences and Verbs: talking about God", in *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology*, eds. Joshua Davis and Douglas Harink (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 314.

⁵ Rutledge, 314.

⁶ See Donald Mackinnon, *The Stripping of the Altars* (Bungay: The Chaucer Press, 1969), 18.

⁷ Basil the Great, "To the Rich" in *On Social Justice*, trans. C. Paul Chroeder (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), 43.

⁸ Rowan Williams, *The Truce of God: peacemaking in troubled times* (London: Faith Press, 1983), 74.

spiritual community... Christians do not have to postulate any ‘perfect’ conceptions of church.”⁹ The reason is, again, that the church is not the agent of reconciliation. Williams asks how the church could ever speak to the world—it is possible only if we look to Christ.

Jesus alone occupies the two worlds. Jesus alone speaks the language of suffering and the language of reconciliation. And he likes to use this unique vantage to agitate the church to action, and to console the world in its pain. “He does not allow either world to settle down in its own convention, but interrupts it with worlds from elsewhere. Into the world of easy hope he brings the memory of hell; into the world of . . . despair he brings the affirmation of love Preaching the gospel may often be to challenge the settled stability of one world of experience by opening it up to the other.”¹⁰ Witnessing to reconciliation, then, might look something like this: like pointing to Jesus as the one who occupies two worlds. Jesus, who speaks the language of hope and contentment is just at home in the language of deep despair and trauma.

It is often observed that the early heretics were sectarian, they placed divisions where unities should prevail: the gnostics divided God into two, and made one a lesser God responsible for creation; the *homoiousians* sympathetic to Arius divided the perfect unity of the life of the Father and the Son; Nestorius introduced divisions within Jesus himself, sharply distinguishing the divine from the human in Christ. The prevailing orthodox theology, by contrast, affirms a fully orbéd unity, where the one God, who creates heaven *and* earth, stoops down in Christ to become one with us and lift us out of our fallenness. For this reason, when Karl Barth attempted to summarise his doctrine of reconciliation—his description of the way that the God of the gospel lovingly picks up our brokenness and carries it with him to the cross and the tomb, so that it might arise with him in the light of the dawn—he simply says, “God became human.” This is what reconciliation looks like: the humble God meeting us where we are, so that the hopeless might understand hope and the untroubled might understand the burden of contentment.

⁹ Stringfellow, *Imposters of God*, 55.

¹⁰ Williams, *The Truce of God*, 81.