



IDENTIFICATIONAL REPENTANCE – THEOLOGY OF APOLOGY

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This offering is little more than an account of where my own thinking has got to on the theology of apology, but designed to help others with theirs. The stage has not yet been reached where it is possible to write definitively on the matter. Clarification and discussion of the issues, rather, are what is needed.

My personal conviction, based on observation and involvement, is that Identificational Repentance (IR) is powerful and effective in achieving healing and reconciliation. More fundamentally, I believe the theology underlying IR to be true – if, as yet, insufficiently clearly articulated.

It is not proposed here to discuss the practical aspects of the ministry of IR. That is being tackled elsewhere (for instance, by John Dawson in 'Healing America's Wounds', Brian Mills and Roger Mitchell in 'Sins of the Fathers', and Chris Seaton in his Peaceworks paper 'Identificational Repentance – towards a definition of IR'). This paper concerns itself mainly with the theory behind IR.

THE ORIGINS OF IR

A registered member of the Confessing Church, Dr Klara Schlink (later Mother Basilea), became, in 1934, National President of the Women's Division of the German Student Christian Movement. After Hitler's rise to power, pressure was exerted on her to accept

'the Aryan paragraph', which would bar Jewish Christians from the movement. She refused to comply, persuading the group also to reject the demand. Throughout World War 2, although informers were present at many of the lectures given by her across Germany, she 'felt constrained to speak of the election of the Jews and their leading position and commission to all nations in the millennium kingdom.' (Basilea Schlink, 'Israel, My Chosen People'. Interrogated extensively by the Gestapo, her being questioned, amazingly, only ever related to her challenge to her hearers to follow Jesus – with the implication that he was the true Leader).

'At the end of the war, clearly perceiving God's hand of judgement in the destruction of many German towns, including her hometown of Darmstadt, she was used by the Lord to start a movement of repentance ... Repentance was the keynote of the revival among the Girls' Bible Study Groups, which gave rise to our Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary, and it was repentance that gave birth to a deep love for Israel in our fellowship.' (ibid) 'The message of repentance for our national crime against the Jews made a decisive impact on the Christian conscience in Germany, greatly changing the attitude towards the Jews, as leading clergymen have attested.' (ibid)

IR arose, then, from the felt need of some Christians in Germany at the end of WW2 to come to terms with the war crimes committed by their nation. First and foremost the question arose: how could Germans face God again after such atrocities?

As a young, globe-trotting New Zealander, John Dawson came across the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary in Darmstadt and was much influenced by their thinking and work. His own experience of Maori-European tensions in New Zealand helped him see the significance of their teaching about repentance and reconciliation. These days, as a founder member and senior leader within Youth With A Mission (YWAM), he heads up the International Reconciliation Coalition; and would be reckoned the leading light in the IR world. His 'Taking our Cities for God' and 'Healing America's Wounds' have been seminal works for those involved in IR. He, it seems, was the one who coined the term 'Identificational Repentance'.

CORPORATE EXISTENCE

"We've almost forgotten what it was like to live in a society that wasn't individualistic. It was 200 years ago since the European Enlightenment first defined society as a collection of rational, autonomous, isolated individuals." (Elaine Storkey, speaking about our individualist society at the National Prayer Breakfast 2000 in Westminster, England).

But the roots of this individualism are much earlier. For the first 1000 years or so of the Christian era, as a rough generalization, Platonism governed the Western worldview. Platonism is comfortable with corporate categories (understood metaphysically – i.e. as part of ultimate, objective reality). In the late Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, Aristotelianism began to displace Platonism. Aristotelianism – this is doubtless to oversimplify Aristotle's seemingly less-than-coherent position – challenges the ultimate validity of corporate categories, being relatively atomistic in its understanding. What is too rarely pointed out is that the Reformation occurred against an Aristotelian, Renaissance background, which emphasised the individual – rather than, say, society. In other words, the thinking of the Reformation owes something to the intellectual environment in which it occurred. That affects those of us in the Reformation tradition today – causing those of us who are children of the Reformation to be more sympathetic to the Renaissance-Enlightenment worldview than is healthy. Indeed, Christians generally in the West tend to bridle at the idea of embracing the corporate categories which are as native to the New Testament as to the Old. We have all too often confused prevailing worldview with revealed truth. When it is suggested that IR is incompatible with Biblical theology, the underlying reality may be more that what it is incompatible with is an insufficiently-critiqued Western worldview.

CORPORATE EXISTENCE IN SCRIPTURE

In the OT individuals become families, and families become nations. Tribes are named after their founding fathers. Cities, likewise, can be named after the founding father of

the people who live there. Tribes, cities and nations are addressed by the Lord, or his representatives, corporately (eg Jos 1:12-15; Jnh 1:2; Ezek 25:1-7). All this is clear enough and largely agreed.

What do we find in the NT, however? A change in emphasis, it seems, but not a fundamental difference from the OT. Cities, for instance, are recognised as having corporate identity. Jesus addresses the city of Jerusalem as he weeps over it (Lk 19:41-44). 'Babylon' (Rev 17, 18), like the new, heavenly Jerusalem, is more-than-a-city – but seen too to have corporate existence.

The Gospel is to be preached to the nations (Matt 24:14). God has a plan for each nation (Acts 17:26). The nations will 'walk by the light of' the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:24).

In the NT, before our new birth we are part of that enormous corporate entity referred to as [being] 'in Adam'; then we are 'in Christ', a smaller, but still substantial one (1 Cor 15:22, etc). The Church, as we read of it in the NT, is very much an organism rather than a collection of individuals.

Perhaps we can say that in the OT individuals as well as groups are in focus; and that in the NT group existence is as real as individual. The Bible shares insights, in this regard, with both Platonism and Aristotelianism: the individual and the group both have real existence.

CORPORATE SIN

Corporate sin is clearly a category known to Scripture. Consider in the OT: Babel, Sodom, Pharaoh-Egypt, the Canaanites, the Philistines, even Israel itself, in its rebellion. In the NT consider: the city of Jerusalem, in its rejection of Christ, and the 'Babylon' world system.

Sin, first and foremost, is an offence, vertically, against God (Ps 51:4). As such, it attracts his sanctions. In particular, it separates us from him (Isa 59:2); when he is the source of

our life, our guide, and the provider of our needs. Usually our sin is also an offence, horizontally, against another person, or other persons, or against a group or groups of people. Where this horizontal offence is perceived by the persons or groups concerned, there are likely to be resentment and retaliation – which may be returned, leading to an escalation of trouble. Furthermore, sin is an offence against self: myself or my group. It brings 'death' for me/us (Rom 6:23). That internal death can include psychological and spiritual disturbance. And, whatever the relevant mechanisms, sin attracts the demonic – so that dark spiritual forces come to operate where sin is left undealt with. In some sense, Satan is 'the prince of this world' (John 12:31), 'the god of this age' (2 Cor 4:4), because of Adam's ancient sin.

Particularly significant is the sin of nations, and other groups, representing themselves as Christian. For instance, the confusion of imperial exploitation and missionary endeavour on the part of 'Christian' nations like Britain – to the extent that they were confused – has all too often led to the rejection, as 'the white man's god', of a Middle Eastern, Jewish Saviour. More fundamental still is the sin of the Church itself: of those who by their baptism have accepted the call, individually and collectively, to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. In this case, God's own people are found to be co-operating with the forces of darkness against him. Most serious of all is that sin explicitly carried out in the name of Christ. The Crusaders, at their initiation, 'took the Cross' – and wore the symbol of the Cross as they slaughtered 'the infidel' (Jews and Muslims), rather than seek to win them, by Kingdom methods, to Christ. The Crusades led directly to the Inquisition (itself a form of Crusade). The Inquisition paved the way for the Holocaust (Hitler claiming, apparently, that he was only acting – as a Catholic – in the tradition of the church he belonged to. Protestants in Germany, similarly, we have to say, had Luther's anti-semitism to appeal to – an anti-semitism he inherited from the longstanding tradition of the Western Church).

If common grace did not cover a multitude of sins – the Bible more implies than explicitly teaches this – life as we know it simply would not be viable. We would be swamped by the consequences of human wrongdoing. That said, not all wrongdoing is covered by

common grace. Many serious sins of one person or group against another are patently allowed to stand.

In Heb 12:24 it seems to be implied that the shed blood of Abel is still speaking – after all this time. Jesus's amazing words to the teachers of the law and Pharisees in Matt 23 rather confirm this impression. Because these people will not repent he calls them 'hypocrites' and 'a brood of vipers', and says: "So upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed upon earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom **you** murdered ..." He is saying that they themselves now carry responsibility for those their forefathers had murdered such a long time before.

Here we see the accumulation of guilt over centuries; also the reaching of a stage where the consequences of that guilt have to be faced. These principles of accumulation and time of reckoning should not surprise us. Adam's transgression triggered an exponential growth of sin down the course of time; and, if the consequences of sin do not just dissipate, we have to expect an exponential increase too in manifestations arising from these accumulated consequences.

For example, World War 1 was an eruption of evil consequent upon all manner of sin on the part of supposedly Christian European nations (not least Britain, France, and a newly assertive Germany): it did not come inexplicably and from nowhere. World War 2 was, in effect, its second part. As a Christian, to come to know the story of WW2 is to understand why Mother Basilea Schlink and her friends felt compelled to find some way of addressing and dealing with the guilt of their nation.

To be British and a Christian – as I am – is to be faced with a similar imperative when, say, the stories of what our people did as early Americans to the native American population, as British convicts or early Australians to the Aborigines, or simply as the British to the Irish in Ireland, come to our notice. Our involvement in the Atlantic Slave Trade is perhaps as shocking as anything we have to confront. And the miserable consequences of these past behaviours – which ranged from brutal exploitation to physical genocide – are only

too readily apparent today: social breakdown in native American, black American and Aboriginal communities, and 'the Troubles' in Ireland. Whose sin? Our sin. Whose suffering? Their suffering.

Corporate existence means that all of us in the group that did wrong have to call the sin of the group 'our sin'. That is basic to the concept of corporate existence, however much we may want to rebel against the idea: "I wasn't there. I had no personal involvement. It's nothing to do with me!"

OUR RESPONSIBILITY CONCERNING GENERATIONAL AND CORPORATE SIN

OT scholar Dr Gary Greig ('Identificational Repentance and Advancing God's Kingdom' in 'Ministries Today Magazine') addresses the Biblical issues of guilt and responsibility.

Of Ex 20:5 and 34:7 he says that rendering them "punishing the children for the sins of the fathers" is 'inaccurately periphrastic'. The Hebrew simply says "visiting the iniquity [state of guilt; Heb 'awon] of the fathers on the sons". 'This means that parental sin-patterns and sin-guilt will be "visited upon", "repaid to" (Heb of Isa 65:6 and Jer 32:18), or "measured out upon" (Heb of Isa 65:7) the children. The children will not be punished for their parents' sins but influenced by the sin-weaknesses, sin-tendencies, and any associated spiritual bondage of their parents to enter into similar sins (Lam 5:7, 16; Jer 11:10; 15:4, 7; 16:10-12) ... The implicit challenge to the children in these passages (made explicit in Ezek 18:20 and Jer 31:29-30) is to *repent* and *make a break with* parental and generational sin rather than continue in it.'

'The OT model of receiving forgiveness of sins is by *confessing* our sins with the intention of *repenting* of them according to Prov 28:13 ("whoever confesses and forsakes [sins] finds mercy"). In the Old Testament's view one should not only confess personal sin but also parental and national sin according to Lev 26:38-40 ("if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers").' He continues: 'We see the kind of confession of personal and corporate, generational sin that is taught by Lev 26:40 practiced throughout

Israel's history by Jeremiah (Jer 3:25; 14:7, 20), by the author who composed Ps 106:6, and the congregation for whom it was written, by Daniel (Dan 9:8, 20), by Ezra (Ezra 9:6-15), by Nehemiah (Neh 1:6-7), and by the restoration Jewish community of fifth century Jerusalem in Neh 9:2.'

Then Greig poses the question: 'Is the confession of corporate sin – which includes generational and national sin – still a legitimate category of confession of New Testament faith, as it was in the Old Testament?' 'New Testament faith', he responds, 'fulfills the deeper principles of Old Testament law (Rom 8:4; 13:8).' Further, 'The NT offers no new framework of sin and confession apart from that found in the OT' – although it has to be recognised that the sacrifice and the means of atonement have changed.

THE WORK OF CHRIST AS VICARIOUS REPENTANCE

For this section I am relying on a paper by Ray Mayhew, 'Vicarious Repentance in the Theology of J McCleod Campbell. Campbell's 'The Nature of the Atonement' (1856) – "a profound and influential work" that has "won a place in the succession of seminal scholars on the atonement", in the words of evangelical theologian David Wright of Edinburgh University – has the vicarious repentance of Christ on behalf of humanity as a central theme. Using material as well from J B Torrance's introduction to the 1996 reprint of Campbell's book and T F Torrance's 'The Mediation of Christ', and adding his own, Mayhew outlines how Jesus exercised this vicarious repentance:

1. By incarnation. 'Simply by joining Adam's race, he was identifying with sinful humanity.'
2. By baptism. 'At the Jordan, John was offering a baptism for the remission of sins. For Jesus to submit to such a baptism was a public declaration of his solidarity with sinners. He was "numbered with the transgressors" (Is 53:12). We have not often taken seriously enough the theological importance of Jesus undergoing a baptism for the remission of sins ('into repentance', Gk *eis metanoian*).'
3. By his prayer of confession on our behalf. 'Most of us have been taught that the 'Lord's Prayer' was not a prayer that Jesus himself prayed because it contains the phrase

"forgive us our sins". Tom Torrance suggests the opposite – that this is *the* prayer that was used by our Lord regularly. Because of his total solidarity with sinners, Jesus, much like Moses, Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, was acutely conscious of his people's sins and that as a man he was implicated in them. Not that he had any personal guilt, but in the same way that the OT intercessors identified with the depravity and rebellion of Israel, Jesus identified with the sinfulness of humankind.'

4. By his personal obedience. 'What began at his birth and was modelled at his baptism was then continued throughout his baptism... His perfect obedience to the Father was a statement of repentance on behalf of humankind' (Irenaeus's 'recapitulation theology' is in view here).

5. By his passion. 'By submitting to mocking and scourging he was saying to God on behalf of us all, "this is what sin deserves"... By accepting death on a cross, he was not only saying to God "this is what sin deserves", he was also becoming in Luther's words "the one sinner"... His personal innocence only added to the depth of his representative repentance.'

6. By embracing the role of great High Priest. 'Commentators have pointed out that in Hebrews there is no direct mention of the resurrection. We go from the cross directly to the enthronement of Christ because the author wants to develop the continuity between the cross and the High Priestly role of Jesus. In the Old Testament, the symbolic actions of the high priest in the tabernacle were a confession of sin on behalf of the people.' 'After making confession on behalf of the people, the priest would come out from the holy place and give the high priestly blessing, "peace be with you". It is not without significance that after Jesus has made atonement he comes to the upper room with the words of the high priest, "peace be with you" on his lips. His vicarious repentance on behalf of his people had been accepted by the Father.'

OUR PRIESTHOOD

"As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you" (John 20:21). We disciples are Christ's body, his limbs (1 Cor 12:12). Under his High Priesthood we exercise a delegated royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:5, 9; cf Ex 19:6). Part of our call is to share in his work of

identification and representation, of confession and repentance. To say this is to use a logic parallel to Paul's when he rather daringly asserts: "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions" (Col 1:24).

If it right to give first priority to the Second Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20), seeking the reconciliation of our fellow human beings to God (2 Cor 5:18-21), reconciliation at the horizontal level is far from irrelevant. Were we regularly to place our church services on hold until Christ's injunction in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5:23,24 had been observed, church life would be unrecognisable from how we know it: "If you are offering your gift at the altar (understand here 'the sacrifice of praise'?) and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother: then come and offer your gift." The Church is meant to be perfect in unity (John 17; 1 Cor 1:10), but offences and hurts cause its fragmentation and reinforce its dividedness. There is a work of reconciliation needed among us, the redeemed. Our gospel message is compromised by the disunity of the Church (John 17:23).

The horizontal ministry of reconciliation is often required before those we seek to reach with the gospel will (can) even listen to it. To choose an obvious example: Jews inevitably have the history of the Crusades, the Inquisition, the ghettos, the pogroms, the Holocaust, and the anti-semitism of centuries – the treatment of their people at the hands of those who called themselves Christians – somewhere in their mind as we try to share with them the good news about Jesus and the Kingdom. Christendom's oppression of the Lord's ancient people means it is (we are) under his judgement as even we seek to speak to them – an additional hurdle. If it is believed, further, that our sin actually empowers the spiritual powers of darkness, then we are operating against a blinding influence reinforced by our forebears (2 Cor 4:4) – further adding to the difficulty.

The First Great Commission is still of importance for us. The command to us to exercise authority in the Lord's creation (Gen 1:26-28), under him, has not been withdrawn. We are to pray for good government – and if we are to pray for it we are also to work for it –

because this (somehow) assists with people being saved and coming to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:1-4). At this point, if not at others, the two great commissions meet.

We are those who "are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Pet 3:13). And we pray: "Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10) – believing that the Kingdom is now as well as not yet. Somehow we have to live with the paradox that the Kingdom is reforming the world for the better at the same time as the world is going from bad to worse. Opting out, and watching from the sidelines, is not a valid option for us. (The recent hostile publicity about Jewish gold in the Swiss banking system prompted a renewed discussion amongst Christians in Switzerland about the rights and wrongs of their country's having remained neutral during WW2. Did that neutrality, in fact, equate to what the priest and the levite did in the parable of the Good Samaritan?). Our being involved in the world's affairs is basic for us. Among other things, it implies a commitment on our part to the ministry of reconciliation at the level of creation (as well as at the level of redemption).

HEALING THE LAND

Not only human beings and socio-economic and organisational structures are affected by sin, it seems. The physical world also suffers adversely. In 2 Sam 21, a 3-year famine in David's reign turns out to be a consequence of Saul's having broken Israel's covenant with the Gibeonites and attempted to annihilate them a generation earlier (v1). How the killing of seven of Saul's descendants effected atonement in this situation need not detain us. Suffice it to say that, at the end of the related sequence of events, "God answered prayer on behalf of the land" (v 14). The meaning of 2 Chron 7:14 for us today is debated. One principle at least is clear: the wickedness of the people left their land in need of healing.

In the face of a prevailing animist-astrological type worldview, the Genesis 1 creation narrative is quite clear about the 'heavenly bodies': they are only 'lights' (vv14-19). That said, the Bible offers no merely materialistic view of creation. Man-made idols may be utterly lifeless (Ps 115:4-7), but the valleys 'shout for joy and sing' (Ps 65: 12-13), and

heaven and earth are bidden to 'praise the Lord' (69:34; 148) – indeed, the heavens do praise him (89:5; 97:6a) – and the earth 'is to be glad' (97:1). Yet in our rationalism, we have tended to interpret such language as no more than 'poetic licence'.

Alastair Petrie (Sentinel Ministries) is surely only reflecting the biblical view of creation when he teaches: "The land was created by the Lord to reflect his glory." (Ancient Pathways Project spiritual mapping seminar in London, 24 January 2000). Idolatry will involve Israel in, among other things, removal from the land (Deut 4:26) – conversely, true worship will lead to abundant harvest, and more (Ps 67:3-7). Likewise sexual immorality: Lev 18, verse 28 of which reads, "And if you defile the land (through immorality), it will vomit you out [note that the action is attributed to the land here as an active agent] as it vomited out the nations that were before you." Num 35:33-34 instructs the Lord's people: "Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made [under the Old Covenant] for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the one who shed it. Do not defile the land where you live and I dwell ..." In Hos 4:2-3, because 'bloodshed follows bloodshed' 'the land mourns. The Exile was in large part the consequence of the shedding of innocent blood: eg 2 Ki 24:3-4 'Surely these things happened to Judah according to the Lord's command, in order to remove them from his presence because of the sins of Manasseh and all he had done, including the shedding of innocent blood. For he had filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord was not willing to forgive.'

Rebellion against parents also affects the land (Malachi 4:6; cf Exod 20:12).

So the land, at least under the Old Covenant, and the Lord's people, are in a special relationship. But something similar is true for the nations as well, Acts 17:26. Lev 18:28 reminds Israel that the Canaanites had been 'vomited out of the [their] land' because they had defiled it. In the light of Amos 1 and 2, Roger Mitchell says ('Sins of the Fathers', p30): 'The Scriptures reveal that there are justice norms for nations. The Bible makes it clear that there are certain standards of behaviour that God expects of the nations irrespective of whether they are His special people – the Jews – or other neighbouring

nations. God will hold them responsible for their behaviour whether or not it impinges on His people ... the Scriptures make it plain that there is a certain amount of light which he expects all of the nations to walk by.'

What is said about the land in the OT is fundamental. Clearly the meaning cannot be exactly the same for us now as it was then. But certain principles seem to be established that have been neglected because of too radical a view of the distinction between the Testaments. The shedding of innocent blood (as on battlefields, and in concentration camps) and the worship of false gods (as, say, in much of Africa, Asia and South America) still have observable negative effects upon the land. Often in the case of the former, at such sites either there are no birds (or animals) – or the birds do not sing. After repentance prayer, however, the birds do return or do start to sing again. (Tourist guide books often report this failure of the birds to sing at sites of wholesale bloodshed – this is not just a phenomenon noticed by a few Christians). Again, the barrenness of the land in so much of the world where there is heavy idolatry invites explanation – especially when the more nations have followed the Christian way, the more productive generally has been their land.

IDENTIFICATION

A group has existence not only laterally – its present membership – but chronologically also, down the course of time. Except for sins caused by the group in this generation, however, the only people who can represent, and confess/repent on behalf of, the group are its present members – by the very nature of things, as Peter Wagner has pointed out.

If the present members cannot represent the group with respect to its past, its past cannot be dealt with. Not all sin just goes away – for groups any more than individuals – although some does. Unless living with the guilt and consequences arising from corporate sin is deemed acceptable, it needs to be dealt with. We are not talking primarily about the guilt of a previous generation here, although we are talking about that. We are considering the corporate guilt of a group itself.

In 1983, my wife and I visited the site of the battle of Culloden (1746) near Inverness in Scotland. Culloden Moor had just been cleared of trees. As we walked around, knowing little about the battle, reading what was written on the memorial stones, we had a strong sense of interacting with something profound – but for which at that time we had no categories. Five years ago, having become involved in a Scottish-English reconciliation process, I attended a prayer gathering at Culloden. There I learnt of the massacre of Scottish wounded after the battle – regarded, I discovered recently, as the worst atrocity ever committed by a British army.

Is there nothing that can be done about this – perhaps because 'Butcher Cumberland' is long dead? Prince Charles Edward's – 'Bonnie Prince Charlie's' – defeat at Culloden is significant in Scotland's history. That, however, is the way things go. But the slaughter of their wounded opponents is only one of a series of offences against the Scots by the English committed over the centuries. When a film like 'Braveheart' is released, so are reawakened all the old hurts and passions. The bitterness affects our political process and English-Scottish sporting relations – and doubtless a lot more.

CONFESSION AND APOLOGY

Godly sorrow produces repentance (2 Cor 7:10). Horizontally, a heartfelt apology from one individual to another is powerful to bring healing – to both parties. All of us know what it is to have someone say sorry to us and mean it.

In IR, considerable store is set by discovering – researching, if need be – what are the grievances that the other group has against my group, and the hurts they have suffered because of my group's behaviour. The process of letting members of the offended group tell their story, and their being heard, is vital. Sometimes individuals belonging to the offended group will be present who have little knowledge of the issues, and no emotional involvement. Until, that is, apology starts to be offered by members of the offending group. At that point there can be dramatic spiritual-emotional involvement on the part of

some of these folk, who until then have been virtual onlookers. Afterwards they will be puzzled, perhaps embarrassed, possibly even amazed, at their own behaviour in what, up to that point, was a fairly low-key environment. Such – not uncommon – reactions I regard as particularly significant. Heartfelt apology releases powerful, hidden forces for good. These forces have real potential to heal hurt and transform attitudes in the group offended against. They also help confession to become true repentance on the part of those apologising – and for it to propagate throughout the group.

REPENTANCE?

If an individual, identifying with the relevant group – family, nation, whatever – can represent it, what might the 'repentance' of the group involve?

Quite simply, as with an individual, that a change of attitude (**metanoia**) be achieved – throughout the group – showing itself in the fruits of repentance: changed behaviour (Luke 3:8; Acts 26:20). The suggestion here is that the results of this process, if any, will be measurable.

Confession of sin is fundamental, but of itself it cannot deal with the sin being addressed. Those who argue for the term Identificational Confession instead of Identificational Repentance seem to me to be stopping the process short of its necessary conclusion. Confession is a stage on the way to repentance. Only repentance, as such, will deal with sin.

The issue is this: the group, as a group, has sinned; ultimately the group, as a group, has to repent. In practice this has to be a process, over a period of time. It is most unlikely to happen at a particular point in time.

When, in 1997, British Prime Minister Tony Blair apologised for Britain's negligence during the 19th century Irish Potato Famine – Britain having had governmental responsibility for Ireland at the time – the strong positive impact of that was soon demonstrated. After

terrorist bombs exploded at Omagh a few months later, causing considerable carnage, he and the Irish Prime Minister acted as one man, pushing almost identical, and quite controversial, measures through their respective parliaments – behaviour almost impossible to conceive of previously. For years prior to that, Christians had been at work behind the scenes, seeking the Lord and pursuing reconciliation. Over time, the Church in its institutional form had been drawn into the process. So a long, and rather hidden history had paved the way for the actions of the British Prime Minister. When 'the Troubles' began in Ireland, English attitudes towards the Irish were fairly contemptuous. Even in the Church, whenever Ireland was prayed for, the feeling was that 'Ireland had a problem'. Today there is a respect for Ireland, on the part of England, that never existed before. In the Church, at least, and maybe not only in the Church, there is now an understanding that 'the Irish problem' was actually our fault, something we inflicted on them – the English curse on Ireland. 'The Troubles' are not yet fully over. The process of reconciliation is incomplete. My own conviction, though, is that Ireland is an instructive demonstration of the workings of the IR process.

PROGRESSIVE REPRESENTATION

This term, coined by Dutch prayer leader Pieter Bos, explains what seems to have been going on in a case like the English-Irish reconciliation ('Theological Notes about "Identificational Confession"').

'The sins of the city must in the end be confessed by (the official representation of) the city, "the Mayor in official attire". But it is only the Church that can "apply" the blood of Jesus as [the] means of forgiveness of corporate sins. And it is often pioneering individual intercessors who prepare the way for the church to make these steps. In other words: the intercessors precede the Church, [and] the Church precedes the "official" state representation in the act of confession: progressive representation. The biblical model is the re-establishment of the state of Israel (post Exile): Daniel read the prophecy about the seventy years, believed it and started to pray on it, and an initial return took place. At stagnation of the return, Ezra, probably without ever knowing of Daniel's prayer, also

understood that confession was the key for the return. And so, again, at stagnation another ten years later, Nehemiah. Only then were the people of Israel firmly established. Progressive representation means: corporate confession often starts with "a Daniel", an *intercessor* (Dan 9), who represents his people through identification. This opens the way for "an Ezra", the *spiritual leadership* (Ezra 9), who at [the] corporate level, at [the] church level, represent(s) the people before God. That opens the way to the real and final confession through "a Nehemiah", the *secular leadership*, "the Mayor in official attire", the representative of the corporate body that committed the sin (Neh 1:9).' In Pieter Bos's understanding: 'If indeed the Mayor, or the King or the President, confesses the corporate sins and leads the people to turn from their wicked ways, only then has identificational confession become identificational repentance' (the final step in the process, rather than the process itself, being seen as 'repentance', on this view).

IN CONCLUSION

We live in an age of apology for past, corporate sin, seemingly prompted by the Holy Spirit. Arguably, the world is ahead of the Church on this one – though the Church, not least the Catholic section of it, is increasingly getting involved.

What is needed is a clear understanding of the principles involved, and the formation of an adequate theology of apology, both theoretical and pastoral. My hope is that this paper will help in some way in its production.