

In grace we may forget: Recollection for the sake of reconciliation in Barth and Mandela

Edwards, Mark J
Nassau Presbyterian Church, New Jersey, USA
mark@nassauchurch.org

Abstract

This article defends the active role Barth gives to God's grace as humans forget and remember. Barth holds humanity's ability or inability to recollect memories, especially traumatic ones, as divinely willed for the sake of reconciliation with the past. Arguing this as consistent with Barth's broader theology of time and eternity, the article defends this as a correlation of Mandela's conviction that "True reconciliation does not consist in merely forgetting the past."¹ Like Barth, Mandela advances from a motive of reconciliation in the recollection of past horror. Though, for Mandela, humanity must "come to terms with the past" so that "we can bury those evil experiences"² we must first remember. Recollection, however, is not for the sake of revenge or retribution, but for the goal of forgiveness, reconciliation, and ultimately blessed forgetting. Mandela and Barth thus share the conviction that by grace we may remember the past, through grace we can forgive time's evils, and in grace we might someday blessedly forget time's horrors.

Key words

Barth; Mandela; time; memory; forgiveness

-
- 1 Statement of the National Executive Committee on the occasion of the 84th Anniversary of the African National Congress: 8 January 1996.
 - 2 Address on the Anniversary of Soweto Uprising: 16 June 1994.

1. Introduction

This article defends the active role Barth gives to God’s grace as humans forget and remember.³ Barth holds humanity’s ability or inability to recollect memories, especially traumatic ones, as divinely willed for the sake of reconciliation with the past. Arguing this as consistent with Barth’s broader theology of time and eternity, the article defends this as a correlation of Mandela’s conviction that “True reconciliation does not consist in merely forgetting the past.”⁴

Like Barth, Mandela advances from a motive of reconciliation in the recollection of past horror. Though, for Mandela, humanity must “come to terms with the past” so that “we can bury those evil experiences”⁵ we must first remember. Recollection, however, is not for the sake of revenge or retribution, but for the goal of forgiveness, reconciliation, and ultimately blessed forgetting. Mandela and Barth thus share the conviction that by grace we may remember the past, through grace we can forgive time’s evils, and in grace we might someday blessedly forget time’s horrors.

2. Divine delete and refresh

On an easily overlooked page late into *Church Dogmatics* III/2, while discussing the “the oblivion” into which the past sinks, Karl Barth claims, “It is a good thing that we are able to forget, that we can pray, *quod vixi tege*. And it is a good thing that God draws this veil over the past even

3 An earlier version of this article was presented at the International Barth Conference (21-25 October 2018) “Embracing Things Past and Things to Come” hosted by the University of Stellenbosch Theology Faculty, the School of Humanities at the University of South Africa, and The Center for Barth Studies of Princeton Theological Seminary. I am grateful for perceptive comments offered in person and, once submitted to STJ, via blind peer review. Remaining flaws are my own.

4 Nelson Mandela and ANC Executive Committee, “Statement of the National Executive Committee on the occasion of the 84th anniversary of the African National Congress,” 8 January 1996. SAHistory.org. [Online]. Available: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/january-8th-statements-statement-national-executive-committee-occasion-84th-anniversary-anc> [Accessed: 24 June 2019].

5 Nelson Mandela, “Address on the Anniversary of Soweto Uprising,” 16 June 1994. SAHistory.org. [Online]. Available: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/address-president-nelson-mandela-anniversary-soweto-uprising-16-june-1976-16-june-1994> [Accessed: 24 June 2019].

without our asking.”⁶ Barth thus seems to claim that, at least on some occasions, God makes humans forget. Just a half page on he claims the inverse, writing, “Of course, there are things in our past we should prefer to forget but cannot. Since this is the case, God must have ordained that it should be so.” At other times, it would seem, God makes humans remember. Notable for being one of the rare occasions where Barth boldly claims God is pulling the strings of causation in this world, with neither deep defence nor extensive clarification Barth suggests God taps not only the delete key on memory but the refresh button as well. Typically, the elaborate dialectician, one might ask whether Barth is serious about such blunt divine intrusiveness? This article suggests Barth is serious in such claims and that the *Church Dogmatics*’ theology of time and eternity has the internal resources to make such accounts coherent.⁷

By way of defending Barth’s claim that God is refreshing and deleting memories, we must first clarify Barth’s broader framing of the problem of the past tense and how time separates humanity from itself. In *CD III/2*, 532–540 Barth addresses the complexities surrounding the fact of “I have been.”⁸ This “juxtaposition,” writes Barth, “of present and perfect – ‘have’ and ‘been’ – raises at once the whole problem we have to solve.”⁹ The problem of the past-tense, as Barth sees it, is that the present tense is a present with a past. This means, writes Barth, that “I am now the one who has been.”¹⁰ This present tense with a history means, “I am not” simply “a blank sheet of paper”¹¹ but rather an existing *now*, as a page with text already written on it. He writes, “The good and the evil, the achievements and failures of

6 Karl Barth, *The Church Dogmatics*. 4 vols. in 13 parts, ed. Bromiley and Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1969). *CD* hereafter. *CD III/2*, 540. *quod vixi tege* translates as “cover my past life.”

7 In the background then, is the critique by RH Roberts which sees Barth’s attempt on eternity as “the stricken, glorious hulk of some great Dreadnought” with our remaining task only to “dismember and salvage.” See: R.H. Roberts, “Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Time: Its Nature and Implications” in *Karl Barth: Studies of his Theological Method*, ed. S.W. Sykes. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 146. In contrast, Barth’s language and logic of time and eternity are coherently sustained by the living triune God, a point that will be articulated and defended below in section III.

8 *CD III/2*, 532–533.

9 *CD III/2*, 533.

10 *CD III/2*, 532–533.

11 *CD III/2*, 533.

my past are not simply written off; they belong inalienably to me [...] I am what my past has made me.”¹² Yet while the creature brings its past with it, it does not, however, bring all of it. “A line,” he writes, “has been drawn across the page, separating what I was from what I am now.”¹³ Moreover, “that fatal line” of the repeating *now*¹⁴ means both identity and memory of identity, are perpetually torn from the creature. Creaturely existence in time is problematic, according to Barth, since the past is gone, and it is only through fallible memory that creatures interact with what has been.

Humanity’s complicated relationship with the “fatal line” of the past confronts it in ways that it seeks to overcome or ignore altogether. Barth suggests humanity’s attempt to grapple with this line of death and perpetual transience into the past is manifested in two ways: “the one by memory; the other by oblivion.”¹⁵ On the hand, a human may try to perpetually reconstruct her past through collective and individual efforts of memory. On the other hand, a human may actively seek to forget, thus attempting to deny his past events ever existed in the first place. Let us deal first with attempts at denial and oblivion.

Humanity’s attempt to deny the past might very well be successful were it not for a divine being before whom the past stands as an ever-present reality. “What has been,” writes Barth, “is in God’s hands, and therefore real.”¹⁶ For Barth, not only is it the case that “God never forgets,” it is the case that as the reader’s perspective on the page is different from that which is any one letter or line on the page, so too God comprehends the whole. So, the past stands as a present reality, not to the creature, but to God’s eternal

12 CD III/2, 533.

13 CD III/2, 533. Indeed, since this line creates a gap that it is forever out of reach one might well wonder, as does Barth, “What guarantee is there that my past is real?” This question is not new. For instance, see Augustine in Book XI [Ch.18–21] of *The Confessions*. For Augustine’s treatment of the present as “a point of time so small that it cannot be divided into even the most minute particles of moments” and that the present “must fly so rapidly from future to past that it has no duration and no extension” see *The Confessions*, Book XI, 15 (264). Humanity’s attempt to securely grasp a fading past in fleeting atomic present instants, is what Barth calls “our disturbing situation” (534) that he likens to falling “from cliff to cliff” (515).

14 CD III/2, 534.

15 CD III/2, 534.

16 CD III/2, 540.

being which encompasses not only a divine past, present, and future, but all of time's as well. Thus, the past, which is illusive and fading to the creature in time, and which is often denied outright, stands as a present “terrible plight”¹⁷ before the God.

Given the presence of one's broken past before God, in Barth's eyes it is a blessing granted by God's graciousness “that we are able to forget” and it is “a good thing that God draws this veil over the past even without our asking.”¹⁸ To be able to forget the past is thus to be given the gift of freedom from the sloth and sin which creaturely life has been. It is to have the broken failures of sinful life, indeed the broken failures that is a human life,¹⁹ separated from oneself, “as far as the east is from the west.”²⁰ And so though the terrible reality of an aorist past, perfectly inaccessible to an individual (cognitively speaking), remains imperfectly present before God (grammatically speaking). Though God does not forget, God makes the creature forget. And this is grace. Should the creature have perfect cognition of one's whole life, “We should never be able to bear the sight of our whole being in time.”²¹ Divine deleting of memories of creaturely brokenness is grace, because God does not hold the past against us. Via the providential deletion of memories, a deletion which results in forgetfulness of both trespasses and debts, the human is set free.²² Says Barth, “In so doing, He allows us to live today for tomorrow with just the few memories we need of what was.”²³ It is then an act of grace that one forgets, for God separates the fallen creature from most of the total depravity that is its past.

17 CD III/2, 540.

18 CD III/2, 540.

19 Recall, for instance, Paul's diatribe against presumptions of sinlessness: “There is no one who is righteous, not even one.” Romans 3:10ff.

20 Psalm 103:12

21 CD III/2, 540.

22 For a troubling parable of living with perfect and complete cognition of all one's past ever before one's eyes, see the British science fiction series *Black Mirror* “The Entire History of You” (Season 1, Episode 3). The premise of implanted computer hard drives coupled with optically connected data recorders enables 100% retrieval of everything one's eyes have ever surveyed. One can scrub through the recorded video of one's entire life, seeing and reliving in real time everything one has ever seen. It becomes too much to bear.

23 CD III/2, 540.

Yet according to Barth, God is also gracious in the converse. For there are cases where the creature might naturally forget, or wish to forget, that which ought to be remembered. In such instances, by grace God makes the creature remember. For on Barth's account, God does not perpetually wipe the memory clean, deleting the entire "hard drive" such that human life has no history, no concept of self, and no memory.²⁴ Humans do remember, and some memory is necessary for life. Yet as Barth notes, "there are things in our past we should prefer to forget but cannot."²⁵ Although a person may very well attempt "the forcible suppression of memories" there are those "memories which we cannot really succeed in obliterating."²⁶ Quite boldly Barth claims, "Since this is the case, God must have ordained that it should be so."²⁷ Humanity *may* remember and indeed on occasion, God makes it do so. Furthermore, to try and conceal what "God Himself has not concealed" is to court "psychological disorders" for "enforced oblivion is as bad as enforced recollection."²⁸ It is for knowledge of redemptive grace, however, and not for perpetual and endless torment that the mind is made to recollect.

Ultimately both remembering and forgetting, especially the painful and difficult, are via grace and for grace because God's intention for all memory is reconciliation, just as reconciliation is the grounding and telos of time itself. We now turn to defending the claim, that Barth's account of time in the *CD* demonstrates that reconciliation is the telos of all time.

24 For a troubling parable on this sort of existence, see the 2000 Christopher Nolan film, *Memento*, in which a man with virtually no memory struggles to solve his wife's murder.

25 *CD* III/2, 540.

26 *CD* III/2, 540.

27 *CD* III/2, 540.

28 *CD* III/2, 540.

3. Divine moments in time and eternity

3.1 Divine moments *ad extra*

As time and eternity is a meta-theme in the *Church Dogmatics* with well over a thousand pages of treatment,²⁹ a sweeping survey of multiple sections will not be attempted here.³⁰ Such an attempt is unnecessary, just as it might be unwieldy, because just ten pages before his statements on recollection and forgetting,³¹ Barth gives a succinct yet surprisingly comprehensive account of his theology of time in a single page.

God “gives us time.”³² This is the most basic thesis of Barth’s theology of time. God *makes* time for the creature and the world in which it lives. God generates time for the world and gives time to it because God loves, chooses, guides, and redeems this world. Echoing his doctrine of election of II/2,³³ Barth writes “he has turned wholly to us,” and “claims us wholly for Himself, for fellowship with Him.”³⁴ Expounded in the language of temporality, Barth elaborates, “Without Him, without the fact that He is for me, I should have no time and therefore, since I can *be* only in time, I

29 Minimally speaking, the key sections being: §14 “The Time of Revelation,” §31.3 “The Eternity and Glory of God,” §33.2 “The Eternal Will of God in the Election of Jesus Christ,” §41 “Creation and Covenant,” §47 “Man in His Time,” §53.1 “The Holy Day,” §59 “The Obedience of the Son of God,” §62.3 “The Time of the Community,” §65.2 “The Sloth of Man,” §72.1 “The People of God in World-Occurrence,” and §73.2 “Life in Hope.”

30 George Hunsinger’s “Mysterium Trinitatis: Karl Barth’s Conception of Eternity” in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000) has been the standard short-course treatment of Barth’s redefinition of eternity. For longer, generally positive, treatments see: James Cassidy, *God’s Time for Us: Barth on the Reconciliation of Eternity and Time in Jesus Christ* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016); Mark Edwards, *The Divine Moment: Eternity, Time, and Triune Temporality in Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics* (PhD dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2013). Eunsoo Kim, *Time, Eternity, and Trinity: A Trinitarian Analogical Understanding of Time and Eternity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010); or Adrian Langdon, *God the Contemporary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012). While Kim and Langdon both argue for an *analogia temporalis*, and Cassidy suggests Barth achieves the rapprochement of time and eternity, Edwards seeks to show that God’s triune temporality *ad intra* is manifested *ad extra* as time.

31 *CD* III/2, 530-531.

32 *CD* III/2, 530.

33 See *CD* II/2, Chapter VII “The Election of God,” especially §33 The Election of Jesus Christ.

34 *CD* III/2, 530.

should not *be* at all.”³⁵ Time is election because the creature does not “sink into a void” of “nothingness” even though it only has this fleeting present moment, a moment which is gone as soon it arrives, a moment that is “without duration or extension.”³⁶ Election is time because God “is present to us” and “fills our present” with God’s self. So, Barth can conclude, “Time is given me ... directly by Him.”³⁷ Because the present moment is a genuine gift of God to the creature, each moment is a genuine present in which the creature lives, moves, and has its being.

Time’s consistent presence and steady flow derives from God’s continued affirmation of created being, to the point that it can be said that Christ is time, though this needs to be articulated with great care. Though, for Barth, time is elected to be “our form of existence,” it is not simply an empty container for creaturely being. Time is ultimately a gift given “directly by Him,”³⁸ even as such continued affirmation stands both under judgement (for being not-god, ungodly, distinct, hostile, alien, other, and prone to nothingness) and under gracious reconciliation (as being adopted, elected, upheld, guided, called-out, justified, sanctified, and loved). “The fact, that man is always now, ” Barth argues, is because “the present of the eternal God as the Creator of time is the secret of our present.”³⁹ In other words, God’s presence to the creature affirms its being and makes it genuinely real in this present moment. And although Barth will launch the strongest rhetoric elsewhere against the notion that we can deify any conception of time, indeed saying, “There is no god called Chronos”⁴⁰ and “Time can have nothing to do with God,”⁴¹ once natural theologies of clocks, change, and being have been deconstructed, Barth’s basic theological point is that “His presence as such is the gift of my time.”⁴² Indeed, once time is properly understood as a limited but continuous gift secured in the reconciliation

35 CD III/2, 530 . Emphasis Added.

36 CD III/2, 530.

37 CD III/2, 530.

38 CD III/2, 530.

39 CD III/2, 531.

40 CD III/2, 456.

41 CD II/1, 608.

42 CD III/2, 530.

of Jesus’s self-election, it can be said *Christ is time*.⁴³ Saying so, however, necessitates at the deepest levels, that the creature repents of former understandings of time as “millions of identical oscillations of the clock,” that one reforms one’s understanding of “an exalted but static picture of God” and that one sees eternity as the domain of the “*living God*.”⁴⁴ Christ is time because God shares God’s triune life with the world through Christ, again and again, as time, as history, as moments, as *now*.⁴⁵

Recalling the driving thesis of this investigation then, that recollection is fundamentally for the sake of reconciliation, Barth shows how God’s refreshing and deleting of creaturely memories is coherent with God giving the creature fresh moments as time. Barth’s Christocentric temporal occasionalism is further coherent with his doctrine of God because, for Barth, God can share moment-by-moment life with the world owing to the fact that, “God himself has particular moments.”⁴⁶ These divine moments are not simply *ad extra*, that is, “in His being, speech and action in relation to us.”⁴⁷ Rather, these particular moments are also in, and flow from, the divine being *ad intra*. God after all, is the living *triune* God. And the eternity of the triune God is, as Barth argues, “the fount and sum and source of all time.”⁴⁸

3.2 Divine moments *ad intra*

According to Barth, that God is *living*, and that divine eternity is itself pre-temporal, supra-temporal, and post-temporal, means that “God is supremely temporal.”⁴⁹ Time *ad extra*, then, is what and why it is because of

43 See, for instance, Barth’s claim that “He Himself is time for us” (CD II/1, 612) or Barth’s argument for understanding “the time of Jesus as the time of God” in CD III/2, 463ff. This later claim is also the extended point of CD I/2’s §14 “The Time of Revelation.”

44 All three quotes are on CD III/2, 531. Emphasis added in the final quote.

45 See, for instance, Barth’s maxim that “Revelation is not a predicate of history, but history is a predicate of revelation” in CD I/2, 58.

46 CD III/2, 532.

47 CD III/2, 532.

48 CD III/2, 530.

49 CD II/1, 614. §31.3 “The Eternity and Glory of God” makes the broader case for this triune and perfectly temporal understanding of eternity. See especially p. 619 for the initiation of Barth’s treatment of eternity as pre-, supra-, and post-temporality. For extended treatment of divine temporality, see Chapter Two of Mark J. Edwards,

how the triune being of God is *ad intra*. One can find a supremely concise summary of Barth's thinking regarding eternal triunity, and thus eternal temporality, again on a single page: *CD II/1*, 615. This definitive passage ultimately presents God as "undividedly beginning, succession and end, all at once in His own essence." Readers are right to see that in God's triunity "there is order and succession" and that God's "unity is in movement." Here Barth states, "God is once and again and a third time," in a way which means, "God has and is Himself time." Indeed "His time" is "the absolutely real time." Such perfect time, according to Barth, has "a movement which does not signify the passing away of anything, a succession which in itself is also beginning and end."⁵⁰ The divine triunity thus yields a perfectly triune temporality.

Barth unites the triune begetting of the persons with an ongoing triune self-knowing as the divine persons, a self-knowing in which the differences of otherness is perpetually reconciled into harmonious *koinonia* or fellowship. Eternity, therefore, is the ongoing, and uniquely temporal, triune living and loving of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For Barth, such logic is holistically expressed with a sort of pun nestled unassumingly in the midst of his dialectical affirmations. Here, "God is once and again and a third time."⁵¹ According to this thought form, God is *einmal* ("one time") as the Father, *noch einmal* ("again one time") as the begotten Son, and then is self-posed *und noch einmal* ("and again one time") as the Holy Spirit. The upshot of such a formation is that it offers double referent to God in both a ontological and chronological way.⁵² Like many of his themes, Barth can also restate this using other terms, as he does for instance in *I/1*: "The name of Father, Son and Spirit means that God is the one God in *threefold repetition*."⁵³

The Divine Moment: Eternity, Time, and Triune Temporality in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics.

50 *CD II/1*, 615. See also *CD II/1* 693-694.

51 "Gott einmal und noch einmal und noch einmal" (*KD II/1*, 693).

52 Barth can rephrase this yet another way. See also *CD II/1*, 593: "God in Himself wills a first and therefore a second. And conversely, He wills a first for the sake of a second. Again, He wills a second and therefore a first, and, again conversely, a second for the sake of the first."

53 *CD I/1*, 350. See also *CD I/1*, 376: "The biblical witness to God's revelation sets us face to face with the possibility of interpreting the one statement that 'God reveals Himself as the Lord' *three times in different senses*" (my emphasis).

The doctrinal ground Barth gains is to establish that God is recurrently a freshly manifesting triune God. In this “uninterrupted cycle”⁵⁴ of *koinonia*, the triune God effectively generates a “supremely temporal”⁵⁵ life and establishes the “absolutely real time”⁵⁶ which is eternity. So, Barth argues that God’s internal life yields an ongoing tripartite temporality because the divine life is an ongoing triune relation. God’s triune *internality* yields an ongoing supremely temporal *eternality*. That this perfect, genuine, eternal divine temporality is shared with the hostile world *ex nihilo* as time is a manifestation of divine grace. And so, time is given to the world (*einmals, noch einmals, und noch einmals*) that it might know, remember, and give witness to the reconciliation of its hostile otherness accomplished in Christ. The world is to be drawn into the relation of the glorious *koinonia* of the triune life. Reconciliation of the not-godly others with the godly Others is thus the point, not only of recollection, but of time itself.

Barth’s claim of God deleting and refreshing memory is both coherent and consistent with this larger theology of time because God grants the world of otherness moment-by-moment the opportunity to know the reconciliation that has happened to the world in Christ. This reconciliation is in essence the replication and repetition with others *ad extra* of the perpetually ongoing divine relationship with Others *ad intra*. Barth thus coherently suggests if there is conscious recollection of memories, and more especially traumatic ones than, say, where one has placed one’s keys, it is divinely willed for the sake of the reconciliation of that past. The introduction of trauma at this point is not arbitrary as the mode of God’s reconciliation is Christ on the cross. The cross is, from the first, a site of trauma, terror, and pain. That the cross is the disclosing of divine justice, that this justice is inclusive of divine and human suffering, and that this suffering is redeemed into the glorification of the resurrected Son is indicative that recollected trauma can be reconciled such that its pain and horror is washed away.⁵⁷ The crucifixion, after all, has become *good* news and in it both the individual

54 CD I/1, 370. Emphasis added.

55 CD II/1, 614.

56 CD II/1, 615.

57 See CD IV/1 §59.2 “The Judge Judged in Our Place” for Barth’s treatment of Christ as judge (231), as judged (236), as himself the judgement (244), and as disclosure of divine justice (256).

and the corporate ultimately find a new earth made real; a new earth free of tears, mourning, and death.⁵⁸ The justice of God in Christ is, in Barth's words, "the end of the old aeon and the beginning of the new."⁵⁹ Since true recollection is ordered to true reconciliation, reconciliation forgets the hostility, fear, and pain which initially opposed it. As Jeremiah proclaims, "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."⁶⁰

We now turn to Mandela to suggest that recollection for the sake of reconciliation is what drives his practical political theology of time. Before doing so, let us reiterate the ground that has been covered, that Barth shows how God's refreshing and deleting of creaturely memories is coherent with the eternally living God giving the ungodly creature fresh moments as time.

4. Mandela lives it out

Here we begin with Mandela's conviction that "True reconciliation does not consist in merely forgetting the past."⁶¹ Perhaps one must never forget? Without seeking to do history as revisionist hagiography (indeed the argument is exactly the opposite: flaws and failings of the past are recollected precisely for a deeper appreciation of divine grace), and without claiming that Mandela never diverges at any point from this trajectory, in the following examples it is clear Mandela advances from a motive of grace in the recollection of trauma and horror. For Mandela, we must remember, though memory itself is in service to forgiveness. Moreover, that these examples would seem to be core representatives of Mandela's overall career demonstrates how Mandela repeatedly lived out, if unawares of Barth's articulation, a theology of recollection for the sake of reconciliation.

58 Revelation 21:1–5

59 *CD IV/1*, 257.

60 Thanks to Miroslav Volf for this citation. See *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 134. Though Volf references Barth's passages on forgetting and remembering in his chapter seven, "River of Memory, River of Forgetting," he does not extensively exegete them. Volf in turn affirms Barth's point: "Non-remembrance of wrongs suffered is the gift God will give to those who have been wronged. It is also a gift they will gladly share with those who have wronged them." (142)

61 Nelson Mandela, "Statement of the National Executive Committee on the occasion of the 84th anniversary of the African National Congress," January 8, 1996.

Starting late in Mandela's life and career, the first instance comes statements on the 18th anniversary of the Soweto Uprising. Mandela argues "it serves no purpose to continue blaming the past" for the dire problems of South Africa's present. He continues,

There is nothing to fear from democracy. The African National Congress seeks no retribution. Our message of reconciliation is inspired by a genuine love for our country. When we call for the truth we do so in order to ensure that all of us come to terms with the past. So that we can bury those evil experiences secure in the knowledge that future generations will recoil from any temptation to repeat them.⁶²

True, for Mandela, we *must* first remember. However, Mandela's motive for recollection is not a "never forget" and thus a "never forgive" style stubborn recollection for the sake of fuelling future hostility. Rather individuals and groups must "come to terms with the past" so that "we can bury those evil experiences." Yet memory is not vindictive recitation for the sake of revenge and retribution. As Mandela emphasized again eighteen months later, "Vengeance is not our goal."⁶³ Nor for Mandela is doing history an impartial cerebral data collection for the sake of anesthetized event retelling, even if about the complicated journey of a geographic collective. While doing history might include such activity, it is not the ultimate goal. In Mandela's eyes one does accurate, not white-washed, history for the telos of advancing a new peace and a deeper harmony: "The building of a new nation at peace with itself because it is reconciled with its past, is our objective. Let us all therefore tell the truth that has to be told, and thus become architects of the new order of respect for the life, the dignity and the rights of every citizen."⁶⁴ Indeed as Desmond Tutu later explained, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission "proved to be a better way of getting at the truth than court cases."⁶⁵ Recollection for the sake of

62 Nelson Mandela, "Address on the Anniversary of Soweto Uprising," 16 June 1994.

63 Nelson Mandela, "Statement of the National Executive Committee on the occasion of the 84th anniversary of the African National Congress," 8 January 1996.

64 Nelson Mandela, "Statement of the National Executive Committee on the occasion of the 84th anniversary of the African National Congress," 8 January 1996.

65 Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999), 23.

reconciliation, and not retribution, enables more truth to come to the light. Truthful recollection, in its most painful detail, is thus done in order for reconciliation between all of oppression’s victims, perpetrators included.

A second example comes from Mandela’s time on Robben Island when he writes to Winnie, herself recently arrested and detained at Kroonstad prison. Nelson consoles her saying,

Incidentally, you may find that the cell is an ideal place to get to know yourself, to search realistically and regularly the process of your own mind and feelings. In judging our progress as individuals we tend to focus on external factors such as one’s social position, influence and popularity, wealth and standard of education... but internal factors may be even more crucial in assessing one’s development as a human being: honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, purity, generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve your fellow men—qualities within the reach of every soul—are the foundations of one’s spiritual life... At least if nothing else, the cell gives you the opportunity to look daily into your entire conduct to overcome the bad and develop whatever is good in you. Regular meditation, say of about fifteen minutes a day before you turn in, can be very fruitful in this regard. You may find it difficult at first to pinpoint the negative factors in your life, but the tenth attempt may reap rich rewards. Never forget that a saint is a sinner who keeps on trying.⁶⁶

See that for Mandela, “regular meditation” yields awareness of “negative factors” so that one can “overcome the bad.” The goal is for pure virtue, “qualities within the reach of every soul,” to blossom into the “the foundations of one’s spiritual life.” Reconciliation with the past and with others is thus the point of scrubbing one’s interior history on a daily basis, even if in search of the smallest flaws and even if while surviving much grosser injustices. If one can reconcile with one’s past failings and see in oneself one’s own flaws, forgiveness towards others is much closer at hand. Recollection is thus for reconciliation.

⁶⁶ Nelson Mandela, “Letter to Winnie Mandela in Kroonstad Prison, 1 February, 1975” in *Conversations with Myself* (New York: Picador, 2010), 211.

A third and final example comes from Mandela's well known "I am Prepared to Die" speech during the Rivonia Trial of 1964. In this famous testimony he takes the dock and after initial introductions promptly tells the truth, voluntarily divulging his guilt, saying, "I admit immediately that I was one of the persons who helped to form Umkhonto we Sizwe, and that I played a prominent role in its affairs until I was arrested in August 1962."⁶⁷

Not only does Mandela admit guilt in full with admissions like, "I planned sabotage", he gives a full rationale for the decision to initiate and then escalate through what he calls the four forms of violence: "sabotage", "guerrilla warfare", "terrorism" and "open revolution".⁶⁸ Why would he take the stand, admit guilt, and give a detailed history and clarification of how he is guilty? Mandela does so as an appeal to the conscience and good will of the court in order to explain that "the Government had left us with no other choice."⁶⁹ But even this rationale is not the final telos of the speech. Rather Mandela tells the truth about the past not out of self-defence but for the sake of, and in the hope of, future reconciliation.⁷⁰ His moving famous closing words, establish this:

67 Nelson Mandela, "I am Prepared to Die" Statement at the Rivonia Trial, April 20, 1964 in *Selected Speeches and Writings of Nelson Mandela* (St. Petersburg, FL: Red and Black, 2010), 88.

68 Mandela, "I am Prepared to Die," 96.

69 Mandela, "I am Prepared to Die," 94. Mandela further confirms Exhibit AD's Manifesto of Umkhonto: "The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices - submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa. We shall not submit, and we have no choice but to hit back by all means in our power in defence of our people, our future, and our freedom."

70 For a reaffirmation of this admission, see: Nelson Mandela, "Address to Rally in Soweto," 13 February 1990. [Online]. Available: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/nelson-mandelas-address-rally-soweto-13-february-1990> [Accessed: March 15, 2019]. "As I said when I stood in the dock at the Rivonia Trial 27 years ago and as I said on the day of my release in Cape Town, the ANC will pursue the armed struggle against the government as long as the violence of apartheid continues. Our armed combatants act under the political leadership of the ANC. Cadres of our People's Army are skilled, not only in military affairs, but act as the political commissars of our movement. We are therefore disturbed that there are certain elements amongst those who claim to support the liberation struggle who use violence against our people. The hijacking and setting alight of vehicles, and the harassment of innocent people are criminal acts that have no place in our struggle. We condemn that. Our major weapon of struggle against apartheid oppression and exploitation is our people organized into mass formations of the Democratic Movement. This is achieved by politically organizing our people not through the use of violence against our people."

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But my Lord, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.⁷¹

What is the ideal for which he is prepared to die? It is not simply freedom, democracy, or equality, but the reconciliation of the races “in which all persons live together in harmony.” Acknowledging that younger South Africans are increasingly critical of the Mandela legacy, and while not arguing for his moral perfection, absolute political purity, or the faultless execution of all ANC policies since, the previous instances, extended as they are throughout Mandela’s career, offer three definitive moments which reveal how deeply and repeatedly Mandela was committed to recollection for the sake of reconciliation.

These stated similarities in Mandela and Barth should not be read, however, to the degree that possible differences are ignored. Barth’s conception of memory and recollection in the above passages is highly individualized, concerned as it is in these passages with individual sins. Mandela’s view is much more communal, focused as it is around *ubuntu* and public reconciliation.⁷² Nevertheless, these need not be read in tension. The blessed forgetting granted to an individual might not warrant a communal forgetting as well. Communal documentation of reconciliation and not a “burn the files” style eradication of the records, is a mode by which reconciliation secured is justice preserved. The painfully beautiful tension between personally forgiven horrors that are not publicly forgotten can be seen in the Rwandan photographs of South African photographer Pieter Hugo. Here perpetrator and survivors stand side by side commenting on the effects of personal forgiveness issued and recorded publicly. For instance, in speaking of forgiving one of his brother’s killer, Christophe Karorero says,

71 Mandela, “I am Prepared to Die,” 116.

72 I am grateful to anonymous peer review comments from *STJ* for encouraging me to think on this point.

Sometimes justice does not give someone a satisfactory answer – cases are subject to corruption. But when it comes to forgiveness willingly granted, one is satisfied once and for all. When someone is full of anger, he can lose his mind. But when I granted forgiveness, I felt my mind at rest.⁷³

Such testimony is evidence that public recollection of personal reconciliation does not necessarily yield a communal forgetting of the events. Yet it is also evidence that with a “mind at rest” the pain, terror, and hostility resulting from those events can be personally unremembered.

5. Conclusion

Mandela and Barth thus share the conviction that by grace we may remember the past, through grace we can forgive its traumas, and in grace we might someday blessedly forget time’s horrors. Barth makes this claim coherent right through an expansive theology of time *ad extra* to the eternal triune life *ad intra*. Likewise, Mandela makes such a view realistic showing how this can be practically and admirably lived out, even amidst situations which prohibit perfect outcomes.

But there remains the final question: is it true? Is God actually tinkering with memory? There are, surely, numerous (likely pseudo-scientific) ways in which one might try to objectively verify this. The weightier onus, however, is that it be subjectively trusted as true within a life of discipleship and faith. Here, epistemic priority ought go to those who have actually lived it. One such figure is the Dutch Nazi resister, Corrie ten Boom. In her Holocaust survival memoir “The Hiding Place,” she speaks of God gifting and using her own unexplainable recollections. She writes,

Today I know that such memories are the key not to the past, but to the future. I know that the experiences of our lives, when we let God

73 Pieter Hugo, “Portraits of Reconciliation” in *The New York Times Magazine*, 4 April 2014. [Online]. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/04/06/magazine/06-pieter-hugo-rwanda-portraits.html> [Accessed: 23 June 2019].

use them, become the mysterious and perfect preparation for the work He will give us to do.⁷⁴

“When we let God use them” might be the key. This then becomes the perpetual invitation presented to humanity. The present tense of time, the Now, is the moment given by God, as in Bonhoeffer’s *Nachfolge*, for following after Christ. Each moment is thus ethically charged to be a moment of witness to the reconciliation of the world in Christ. This living God, in Barth’s words, “is primarily and continually present” to each in a way that is “always with a particular offer and summons.”⁷⁵ The summons for discipleship in each moment means, like Christ’s invitation to Simon to “Follow me,”⁷⁶ each now is, as Barth says, “an opportunity which comes only once,” which is “indeed a ‘now or never.’”⁷⁷ Therein we see how Barth’s expansive theology of time and memory, Mandela’s public politics of reconciliation, and the humble testimony of Christophe Karorero and Corrie ten Boom equally attest to this: in grace we may remember and in grace we may forgive time’s horrors. Perhaps someday, awash in eschatological grace, we may also blessedly forget time’s trauma.

Bibliography

- Augustine 1963. *Confessions*. Translated by Rex Warner. New York: Signet Classics.
- Barth, Karl 1936-1969. *Church Dogmatics*, 4 volumes in 13 parts. Edited by Bromiley and Torrance. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Hugo, Pieter. Portraits of Reconciliation, in *The New York Times Magazine*. April 6, 2014. [Online]. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/04/06/magazine/06-pieter-hugo-rwanda-portraits.html?smid=pl-share>

74 Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place: 35th Anniversary Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 2006), 31.

75 CD III/2, 531.

76 Mk 1:17

77 CD III/2, 531.

- Mandela, Nelson. “Address on the Anniversary of Soweto Uprising,” June 16, 1994. SAHistory.org. [Online]. Available: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/address-president-nelson-mandela-anniversary-soweto-up-rising-16-june-1976-16-june-1994>
- “Address to Rally in Soweto.” February 13, 1990. SAHistory.org. [Online]. Available: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/nelson-mandelas-address-rally-soweto-13-february-1990>
- 2010. *Conversations with Myself*. New York: Picador.
- 2010. *Selected Speeches and Writings of Nelson Mandela*. St. Petersburg, FL: Red & Black.
- Mandela, Nelson and ANC Executive Committee. “Statement of the National Executive Committee on the occasion of the 84th anniversary of the African National Congress” January 8, 1996. SAHistory.org. [Online]. Available: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/january-8th-statements-statement-national-executive-committee-occasion-84th-anniversary-anc>
- Ten Boom, Corrie 2006. *The Hiding Place: 35th Anniversary Edition*. Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books.
- Tutu, Desmond 1999. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York: Image.
- Volf, Miroslav 2006. *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- ** The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.