

# Forgiveness

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

BAYLOR  
UNIVERSITY

---

GENERAL EDITOR	Robert B. Kruschwitz
PROCLAMATION EDITOR	David Garland
ART EDITOR	Heidi J. Hornik
REVIEW EDITOR	Norman Wirzba
WORSHIP EDITOR	Terry W. York
PRODUCTION ASSISTANT	Julie Bolin
DESIGNER	Eric Yarbrough
PUBLISHER	The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University PO Box 97361 Waco, TX 76798-7361
PHONE	(254) 710-3774
TOLL-FREE (USA)	(866) 298-2325
WEBSITE	<a href="http://www.ChristianEthics.ws">www.ChristianEthics.ws</a>
E-MAIL	<a href="mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu">Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu</a>

All Scripture is used by permission, all rights reserved, and unless otherwise indicated is from *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

---

ISSN 1535-8585

*Christian Reflection* is the ideal resource for discipleship training in the church. Multiple copies are obtainable for group study at \$2.50 per copy. Worship aids and lesson materials that enrich personal or group study are available free on the Web site.

*Christian Reflection* is published quarterly by The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. Contributors express their considered opinions in a responsible manner. The views expressed are not official views of The Center for Christian Ethics or of Baylor University.

© 2001 The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University  
All rights reserved

# Contents

Introduction	6
Robert B. Kruschwitz	
See How They Love One Another	9
Dorothy C. Bass and Frederick A. Niedner, Jr.	
Forgiveness: Taking the Word to Heart	15
J. Randall O'Brien	
The Purpose of God and the Politics of Salvation	22
Dorothy Jean Weaver	
To Err Is Human; To Forgive. . . ?	29
Thomas G. Long	
Forgiveness in Christian Art	36
Heidi J. Hornik and Robert B. Kruschwitz	
<i>Return of the Prodigal Son</i> , Antonio Montauti	
<i>Expulsion from the Garden of Eden</i> , Thomas Cole	
<i>Sacrament of Penance</i> , Nicolas Poussin	
Heaviness of Heart and Conscience	42
Terry W. York and C. David Bolin	
Worship Service	44
David G. Miller	
The Forgetfulness of God	49
Brian L. Harbour	
Other Voices	54
Forgiveness as a Character Trait	56
Robert C. Roberts	
God's Repentance-Enabling Forgiveness	64
Ralph C. Wood	

*continued*

---

Failing Leaders	71
Robert B. Kruschwitz	
The Heart of Reconciliation	78
A Conversation with John Paul Lederach	
Robert B. Kruschwitz	
Which Way to Forgiveness?	85
Caroline J. Simon	
The Science of Forgiveness	89
Katheryn Rhoads Meek	
Advertisement	95
List of Contributors	96

# Additional Resources

These study guides are available by free download from our Web site [www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws). Each guide integrates Bible study, prayer, worship, and reflection on articles in this issue.

## **FORGIVENESS IS GOD'S PURPOSE**

Forgiveness is central to God's activity in the human realm. But what is forgiveness? And who is the God who offers this to us and seeks reconciliation with a stubborn and sinful humanity?

## **WHY SHOULD WE FORGIVE?**

We are motivated, as Christians, to forgive others for reasons that go beyond self-interest. One surprising result: we are never in the position of privilege, wronged one or wrongdoer, where we are excused from the responsibility of working for reconciliation.

## **THE POLITICS OF SALVATION**

God's repentance-enabling forgiveness is not for the faint of heart. It is a call to radical and costly life changes.

## **BECOMING FORGIVING PEOPLE**

Forgiving people come to 'see' offenders with what the Apostle Paul calls "eyes of the heart". How does God's repentance-enabling forgiveness overcome our resistance to receiving and granting forgiveness?

## **SEE HOW THEY LOVE ONE ANOTHER**

The church, for all its faults and foibles, can teach us to be forgiving people. Congregational worship may provide us with practice and conditioning for the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation.

## **FAILING LEADERS**

Nothing tests our resolve to forgive as when Christian leaders betray or abuse us. Does forgiveness absolve these leaders from accountability? What steps should congregations take to restore and heal fallen leaders?

Another companion to this issue of *Christian Reflection* is the Fall 2001 edition of *AM/FM: Audio Magazine for Family Ministry*. This innovative audiocassette magazine for family ministry features interviews on the theme of forgiveness in family life. See page 95 of this volume for more information or to request a complimentary issue of *AM/FM*.

# Introduction

B Y R O B E R T B . K R U S C H W I T Z

Living out the joy of God's forgiveness, manifest in Jesus Christ, "is all that Christian ethics has ever been or will be." Our contributors offer thoughtful reflection to enrich our understanding of God's forgiveness and to stir our practice of living out its joy.

---

**T**he Triune God loves us, offers us forgiveness, and seeks our reconciliation. This is the bedrock truth despite our betrayals, rejections, manipulations, and abusiveness directed toward people, the creation, and God. This gracious and good news, if we embrace it, shapes us into Christian communities of forgiveness, which train and support us to offer human forgiveness and to receive it.

Forgiveness is the heart of Christian ethics; accordingly it is a most suitable theme for this inaugural issue of *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*. "Humans can participate in the grace manifest in Christ, and, being forgiven by God, both give and receive joy," writes New Testament scholar Timothy P. Jackson. "Embodiment of that joy is all that Christian ethics has ever been or will be."

Our contributors offer thoughtful reflection to enrich our understanding, and guidance to stir our practice of embodying God's forgiveness, through articles, inspirational pieces, book reviews, an interview, Christian art, a hymn, and worship aids.

In *Forgiveness: Taking the Word to Heart* (p. 15), Randall O'Brien says "The whole emphasis of the New Testament is on forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, and holy living manifested and made possible by the love of God through the Cross of Jesus Christ." He wonders, "Why forgive?" and, in response, he outlines three overlapping motivations for forgiveness with surprising results.

Though many of our contributors draw upon the eloquent stories about forgiveness in Luke's gospel, Dorothy Jean Weaver, in *The Purpose of God and the Politics of Salvation* (p. 22), fathoms how deeply the theme of forgiveness runs through Luke's writings. God's forgiveness (and the repentance it provokes), she finds, is "not for the faint of heart. It is a call to radical and costly life changes."

How can we become forgiving people? Bob Roberts, in *Forgiveness as a Character Trait* (p. 56), describes how forgiving people grow to 'see' offenders with what the apostle Paul calls "eyes of the heart".

In our lead article, *See How They Love One Another* (p. 9), Dorothy Bass and Fred Niedner reflect on how the church, for all its faults and foibles, teaches us to see with those "eyes of the heart". Far from transporting us away from our difficult lives, worship may draw us together before God, through baptism and holy communion, with folks whom we find difficult to forgive. Thus congregational life provides "us with practice and conditioning for the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation".

We resist receiving and granting forgiveness, a paradox of our dark souls explored by the great American writer Flannery O'Connor. Ralph Wood surveys her revealing insights in *God's Repentance-Enabling Forgiveness* (p. 64).

When church leaders betray and abuse us, how can we forgive them? Nothing tests our resolve to forgive like these spiritual disasters. Bob Kruschwitz explores what steps congregations can take to restore and heal them in *Failing Leaders* (p. 71).

The biblical good news that we need to hear, Tom Long says in *To Err is Human; To Forgive . . . ?* (p. 29), is that we are not called to *create* forgiveness. It is impossible for us to bring about "the restoration of wholeness and open trust" which is the goal of true forgiveness. "We are called instead to *participate* in a forgiveness given to us as a gift."

Brian Harbor reminds us, in *The Forgetfulness of God* (p. 49), that "God moves in a mysterious way" in treating our guilt. Though we are tempted to disguise or avoid it, God confronts our guilt—in the words of the Apostle Paul, "nailing it to the cross".

Too often we wrongly separate worship and ethics: our praying, praising, and singing are not very humble or ethically insightful, and our social action not very worshipful. To reintegrate our ethical reflection with worship, we offer a service of congregational worship that follows a traditional free church pattern—gathering, proclaiming, and responding. Written by David Miller (p. 44), its prayers and readings may also be used for personal and study-group devotion. Terry York and David Bolin collaborate on a new hymn, "Heaviness of Heart and Conscience", in this volume (p. 42). The other hymns suggested in the service may be found in

the hymnals of many Christian traditions; for sources, please see the most current ecumenical hymnody list compiled by Michael Hawn in *The Hymn* (July 1997), pp. 25-37.

Another wrongly divorced pair is art and ethics. To harness again the visual imagination and guidance for our understanding of forgiveness, art editor Heidi Hornik selects three pieces of Christian artwork to describe (p. 36): Antonio Montauti's sculpture interpreting Jesus' story of the prodigal son, Thomas Cole's image of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, and Nicolas Poussin's painting (reproduced on our cover) which captures the moment of Jesus forgiving the sinful woman before a startled Simon the Pharisee. These artists help us to read scripture with new eyes.

John Paul Lederach has been a consultant and friend both to the highest government officials and to national opposition movements in Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Somalia, Cambodia, and Nicaragua. "Reconciliation is at the very heart of who we are called to be as the people of God," says Lederach, a leading international mediator in the Mennonite tradition. In our conversation, *The Heart of Reconciliation* (p. 78), he talks about conflict in churches with sympathetic keenness.

Caroline Simon sifts through three recent books that offer us guidance on how we can become forgiving people. "One piece of wisdom that they all share," she says in her review essay, *Which Way to Forgiveness?* (p. 85), "is that forgiveness is a process that we cannot complete once and for all."

Katheryn Rhoads Meek explores a new field, the investigation of forgiveness by social scientists, in *The Science of Forgiveness* (p. 89). She shows, "The concept of forgiveness no longer falls solely under the umbrella of religious thought." ❄



---

# See How They Love One Another

BY DOROTHY C. BASS  
AND FREDERICK A. NIEDNER, JR.

The church, for all its faults and foibles, provides us with practice and conditioning for the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation. Just as athletes train and practice some sport, so our life within Christian communities trains us for the moments in our families, workplaces, and society when we will need words, strength, and the Holy Spirit's wisdom.

---

**A** congregation sings “Blessed Assurance” as Depression-era images of small-town Texas fill the screen. As the hymn ends, the camera settles on the Spalding family—husband, wife, son, daughter—saying grace. Their Sunday dinner is soon interrupted, however. Mr. Spalding is the sheriff, and he has to go down to the train tracks to deal with Wiley, a drunken young man who is playing with a gun. Within hours, both will be dead—Spalding accidentally shot, and Wiley, who is black, lynched.

The 1984 film *Places in the Heart*<sup>1</sup> tells the story of Mrs. Spalding's struggle to keep her home and family intact in the face of miserable economic odds and human wrongdoing that ranges from the predictable to the obscene. Her son Frank misbehaves in the usual twelve-year-old ways. Wayne, her brother-in-law, is unfaithful to Margaret, her sister and best friend. Mr. Denby, the banker, shows no mercy as the date of her mortgage payment draws near. A group of Klansmen is barely prevented

from killing Moses, the black man who has helped her bring in a good crop of cotton.

This film exposes sin with clarity and vigor. But it does not give sin the last word. The final scene takes place in a congregation on another Sunday morning. The preacher rises to read the lesson from 1 Corinthians 13: “Love is patient; love is kind, not jealous or boastful. Love never

---

**Almost in spite of ourselves, we who can cherish our grievances with astonishing fierceness find ourselves rehearsing, week after week, the words and gestures that offer release from bondage to the past.**

---

ends.” Quietly, Margaret puts her hand in Wayne’s, offering forgiveness; their marriage will be renewed. When the Lord’s Supper is celebrated, Wayne passes the bread to his wife, then the tray of cups. The bread and juice continue from hand to hand through the congregation to Mr. Denby, and to

Moses, and to some men whose names we do not know (are they Klansmen?), and to Frank, and finally to Mrs. Spalding. She serves her husband, the sheriff, who is now seated beside her, and he then serves Wiley. “Peace of God,” they say.

In this scene, fictional characters experience the forgiveness that is represented to real-life worshipers in Christian congregations week after week. When we are worshipping God, we who so readily become stuck in our greed and hostilities are offered again and again the opportunities to perceive, receive, and reflect to others the merciful face of God.

Almost in spite of ourselves, we who can cherish our grievances with astonishing fierceness find ourselves rehearsing, week after week, the words and gestures that offer release from bondage to the past. We confess that we are sinners in a prayer spoken in unison with some of the very folks whom we have betrayed—folks who have also betrayed us. We receive assurance that in Christ we—and they—are forgiven. We hear the Bible read and the Word proclaimed, and we are convicted of our sin and shown the possibility of new life. We are invited to the Lord’s table to drink from the cup of Christ’s blood, “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” We are sent out to love and serve God and our neighbors.

Those who join in this praying and listening and supping and serving know that entering the realm of reconciliation re-presented within each Christian service of worship is no easy matter. Sometimes a Margaret cannot take the hand of a Wayne, and rarely are a Moses and a Wiley

found at church with the Spalding and Denby families. Christian worship is the gift of God, but it is also the work of sinners; it does not presume that congregations are full of saintly people who forgive and accept forgiveness with ease. Its focus is on One who, though now risen, still bears in his hands and feet the marks of a terrible death. Around *this* Lord's table is gathered a community threatened not only from without but also from within—a community whose first members were Judas, who would betray him; Peter, who would deny him; and ten others, who would abandon him.<sup>2</sup>

Even so, this community is the one within which we are called to anticipate, prepare for, and taste the realm where all of us fallen ones will share the peace of God. And so we boldly pray in this company the prayer that Jesus taught. “Forgive us,” we ask God (*us*, not *me* or *them*); and then in the very next breath we name ourselves, before God and in one another's hearing, as people who likewise forgive those who sin against us. Commenting on this petition, the fourth-century preacher John Chrysostom said that it does not mean that God will not forgive us if we do not forgive others; instead, he argued, the petition emphasizes the relationship between the forgiveness we receive and that which we offer our neighbors because “God wills for us a great benefit, namely, ‘cementing’ us to others who are fellow members of the body of Christ by means of love, casting out what is brutish in us, and quenching wrath.”<sup>3</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who died in a Nazi prison camp only days before the end of World War II, wrote insightfully about forgiveness as an aspect of life in Christian community. Life together, he argued, forms Christians for forgiveness precisely by ridding them of the illusion that they can live without forgiveness! When things go smoothly, he noted, Christians readily get the idea that their own good will and high ideals have laid the foundation and determined the shape of the community's shared life. Sin and the messiness that generally attends it quickly give the lie to that false notion, however. When things become difficult (as they will), those who think that their own gifts are responsible for the existence of community will have only “wishful dreaming” to rely on. “They act as if they have to create the Christian community, as if their visionary ideal binds the people together. Whatever does not go their way, they call a failure. When their idealized image is shattered, they see the community breaking into pieces. So they first become accusers of other Christians in the community, then accusers of God, and finally the desperate accusers of themselves.”<sup>4</sup>

This account is a reminder that many a Christian congregation has come into existence as a consequence of schism stemming directly from a failure to forgive. Quarreling has led to bitterness and resentment, and

eventually certain members of Redeemer by the Gas Station have left to found Prince of Peace on Division Road just outside the city limits. Indeed, two struggling congregations of the same denomination exist in some small towns mainly so disgruntled members of each can have someplace to go where they don't have to worship and pray with old, or perhaps newfound, enemies. This unfortunate wound on the body of Christ not only causes grief and shame among its members, it also represents a major scandal, a stumbling block for the world and for the "little ones" the searching shepherd of Jesus' parables is loathe to lose. "See how they love one another!" has a sarcastic ring to it in some circumstances.

Against this familiar human rush to brokenness, Bonhoeffer suggested that Christians should in fact give thanks when trouble happens among us and our immediate vocation becomes a carefully focused need to forgive. For it is then that we can see—if we will only look—that it is not a human ideal but God's forgiving love that makes community possible. "Because God already has laid the only foundation of our community, because God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that life together with other Christians, not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive. We thank God for what God has done for us. We thank God for giving us other Christians who live by God's call, forgiveness, and promise. We do not complain about what God does not give us; rather we are thankful for what God does give us daily. And is not what has been given us enough: other believers who will go on living with us through sin and need under the blessing of God's grace?" Further, Bonhoeffer asks, "will not the very moment of great disillusionment with my brother or sister be incomparably wholesome for me because it so thoroughly teaches me that both of us can never live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ? The bright day of Christian community dawns wherever the early morning mists of dreamy visions are lifting."<sup>5</sup>

Bonhoeffer wrote these words as he pondered his experiences in a tightly knit residential community of Christians studying for the ministry in the dark and threatening days of pre-war Germany. A typical Christian congregation is a very different sort of community, but the dynamics of sin and the need for forgiveness remain the same. Thus, when painful division and disruption threaten us, we should give thanks—not for the sin that has befallen us, but for the opportunity to put our gifts into practice.

Most of these opportunities come not inside the confines of church life, but in the broader context of our families, workplaces, and communities. In these arenas of life we learn that the church, for all its faults and foibles,

has been providing us all along with practice and conditioning for the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation. Just as athletes train and practice some sport, so our life within Christian communities trains us for the moments when we will need words, strength, and the Holy Spirit's wisdom.

The vision of the divine shepherd who can't abide the loss of a single sheep makes us loath to settle for forms of reconciliation that leave anyone outside. A lifetime of hymn-singing and prayer gives us words at the ready when otherwise our tongues might be tightly tied. The Lord's table transforms all the other tables at which we sit, day in and day out, with sinners who need to be loved and spoken to no matter what's passed between us since last we shared a meal.

Neither the church nor its members live for themselves. We live instead as God's servants on behalf of a world that lives too deeply in alienation, bitterness, and various states of war. At our best, we who make up Christ's body in this world offer to this world a new model for handling the sins that grow profusely as crabgrass. And as we offer our energies and ourselves to that effort, we find that we grow daily into the new selves that have been given us all in baptism.<sup>6</sup>

When we do this, we embody the very gifts we practice receiving and sharing every time we worship the God who is their source. We no longer regard each other as we once did, or from a worldly point of view. No matter what happens among us, we see in each other not only a fellow sinner, but also one of the redeemed for whom Christ died. Within the fellowship of the church,

we see each other in baptismal garments, the working clothes of the new creation, each and every day. In our sanctuaries as well as around our tables at home, we break bread that comes not only from our own labors, but also from Christ who is our true host.

---

**Neither the church nor its members live for themselves. At our best, we who make up Christ's body in this world offer to this world a new model for handling the sins that grow profusely as crabgrass.**

---

If that scene at the end of *Places in the Heart* went on a while longer, we would see some remarkable exchanges of bread and cup that would include the whole body of Christ, all who have ever shared in the grace of this Lord's supper. Somewhere in that mix would be old Athanasius giving the bread to the once angry opponents who exiled him seven times over disagreements of doctrine. John Hus, John Wycliff, and Thomas Cranmer would appear as well, offering the blood of Christ to men who in

righteous anger burned them at the stake as an act of praise to God. Sooner or later the congregation would break into one of those hymns that sixteenth-century Mennonites and other Anabaptists composed on their way to being drowned in their own baptisteries by Catholics and Lutherans. Soldiers whom we sent to destroy one another in all our many wars, and enemies of every other kind as well, would pass the “Peace of God” from one to the other. “Amens” would rise up from worshippers of every nation and race.

And somewhere near the end of the last pew we would see ourselves passing the bread and sharing the peace—one more prodigal son or daughter, one more older brother or sister, falling at last into the embrace of the ever-waiting, always-forgiving Father.

## NOTES

1 *Places in the Heart*, produced by Tri-Star Pictures, was written and directed by Robert Benton. Sally Field won an Oscar as best actress for her portrayal of Edna Spalding.

2 Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 53,114-115.

3 Arland Hultgren, “Forgive Us, As We Forgive,” *Word & World*, XVI (Summer 1996), 290.

4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 36.

5 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, pp. 36-37.

6 L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), chapter 1.

---



### **DOROTHY C. BASS**

*is a church historian. She is Director of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, Valparaiso University.*



### **FREDERICK A. NIEDNER, JR.**

*is Professor of Theology at Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, IN.*

---

# Forgiveness: Taking the Word to Heart

BY J. RANDALL O'BRIEN

The whole emphasis of the New Testament is on forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, and holy living manifested and made possible by the love of God through the Cross of Jesus Christ. But as Clarence Jordan remarked, "We'll worship the hind legs off Jesus, then not lift a finger to do a single thing he says." Is such the case for Christians in the hard area of forgiveness? What precisely is forgiveness? And why should Christians forgive?

---

**W**HY FORGIVE? The words jumped off the face of *Time* magazine, January 9, 1984, even as the cover picture shocked the world. With his left arm in fatherly fashion around Ali Agca, the Turkish gunman who had attempted to take the Pontiff's life, Pope John Paul II tenderly embraced the right hand that had aimed and fired a near deadly round into his person on May 13, 1981. Whispering words of pardon, the Pope forgave his would-be assassin.

A whisper, perhaps, to Agca, the Patriarch's words and action reverberate loudly around the world till this day as an altar call to the spiritually deaf. In forgiving his young, misguided enemy the Head of the Catholic Church offered a troubled, hate-filled world an unforgettable image of grace. Even among Christians, many of whom appear to be more comfortable with Christ in print than in practice, the Pope's action was

disarming. The church leader known to millions of Catholic Christians worldwide as The Holy Father shared, "I spoke to him as a brother whom I have pardoned, and who has my complete trust." Later, addressing women inmates in the prison housing Agca, John Paul went even further proclaiming, "I was able to meet my assailant and repeat to him the pardon I gave him immediately. . . . The Lord gave us the grace to meet as men and brothers, because *all the events of our lives must confirm that God is our father and all of us are His children in Jesus Christ, and thus are all brothers.*" [emphasis mine]

In forgiving his potential killer, Pope John Paul II was taking the Word of God to heart. For the whole emphasis of the New Testament is on forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, and holy living manifested and made possible by the love of God through the Cross of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:5-6; 1 John 4:9).

With his action the Pontiff was giving verbal and visual testimony that for him Jesus Christ is Lord. Moreover, his example sounded a clarion call for believers to move from their life-defined margins of Christianity to the biblically defined center of the faith: Jesus is Lord!

To proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord is to confess the church's earliest baptismal creed (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 8:6). A believer's proof, however, lies not only in his or her profession of Christ, but also in the practice of Christ-like living. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,'" Jesus warned, "will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Clearly forgiveness is the will of God. "If anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other;" Paul wrote. "Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Colossians 3:13). Preaching the Lordship of Jesus Christ elsewhere, the Apostle admonished,

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. . . . whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? . . . For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God (Romans 14:7-10).

In capitalizing on the opportunity to forgive his assailant, the Pope provided the world a story with a moral. Any hope for personal and global peace rests with taking the Word of God to heart. Clarence Jordan, the radically-Christian founder of Koinonia Farms and publisher of the *Cotton Patch Version* of the Gospels, once lamented, "We'll worship the hind legs off Jesus, then not lift a finger to do a single thing he says." Is such the case for Christians in the hard area of forgiveness? What precisely is



forgiveness? And why should Christians forgive?

### **FORGIVENESS: WHAT?**

God created us to live in relational harmony with Him and each other. Sin breaches relationships, causing separation, alienation, and estrangement. Barriers arise. Oneness is lost. What then does the Gospel call us to do? First receive forgiveness from God through Christ and then forgive others. This is God's cosmic plan (Colossians 1:13,14; 3:13). Forgiveness removes the barriers between persons caused by wrongdoing, real or imagined.

The history of forgiveness lies in Scripture. The Hebrews used three main words to express the concept. *Kippur* (atone) and *shalach* (let go) speak of God's forgiveness exclusively, never humankind's. *Nasa'* (lift up, bear, dismiss, send away) is the term for forgiveness most often used in the language of the Old Testament, and may refer to either human or divine forgiveness.

The New Testament translates three Greek words to speak of forgiveness. *Apoluo* (let go, loose) and *charizomai* (be gracious) appear far less frequently than *aphiemi* (let go, send away, pardon, forgive), which more nearly serves as a parallel to *nasa'*, the Old Testament term. In forgiveness, barriers are removed as sins are sent away and persons are drawn together in relationships.

"We pardon to the degree that we love," La Rochefoucauld observed. Faith, hope, and love are, in fact, all virtues prerequisite to forgiveness.

However, love, Paul revealed, is the greatest of these. Love is the "mother of all virtues." Thus two additional biblical Hebrew and Greek terms (several could be mentioned) should be cited in connection with forgiveness. *Chesed* (steadfast love, mercy) in the Old Testament refers to the love of God that refuses to let wayward Israel go. The LORD's *chesed* or steadfast love leads logically to the exercise of mercy and forgiveness toward his covenant people (Exodus 34:6,7). Moreover, Micah (6:8) and Hosea (6:6) leave absolutely no doubt that God expects God's people to extend *chesed* to each other.

---

**What does the Gospel call us to do? First receive forgiveness from God through Christ and then forgive others. This is God's cosmic plan. Forgiveness removes the barriers between persons caused by wrongdoing, real or imagined.**

---

In the New Testament, *agapao* or *agape* (love) refers (among other

things) to God's constant love toward undeserving sinners. *Agapao* or *agape* denotes a love determined by the character of the subject rather than the merit of the object. "It is," as Emil Brunner put it, "not a love that judges worth, but a love which bestows worth." It is a giving love on behalf of others. This is the kind of love God wills that God's people show toward each other. Jesus exclaimed, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). The word for love in each occurrence derives from *agapao*.

Both of these kinds of love, *agape* and *chesed*, give birth to forgiveness. For as W.E. Vine put it, "Love can be known only by the action it prompts." Barriers erected by sin collapse before the virtues of love and forgiveness.

### **F O R G I V E N E S S : W H Y ?**

Why should we forgive? After all, could not a moral case be built against forgiving? There is a natural revulsion against it. Why be a doormat? The complaint is that forgiveness is an invention of weakness. Besides, it is unfair. Is it not true that when we ask people to forgive we ask them to suffer twice: the initial hurt, and then again as they wish the one hurting them well at their own expense?

But if forgiveness is unfair, what is the alternative? The obvious option is rage, hatred, and revenge. "I am accustomed to pay men back in their own coin," Bismark boasted. The problem with getting even, however, is that it never happens! Revenge chains victims and offenders to the wrongdoing, with both parties hopelessly stuck on a merry-go-round of pain where each takes turns hurting the other. "If we all live by the law, an eye-for-an-eye," cautioned Gandhi, "soon the whole world will be blind."

Forgiveness is an option. "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you," Jesus instructed, "for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12). To be sure, opposing ideologies compete for the believer's soul. "You have heard it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you," Jesus enlightened, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-45). Then this warning: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14,15).

Christians should forgive others for three reasons. *First*, we should forgive for the sake of Christ. "You are not your own," admonished Paul, "for you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20). "You have been freed from sin and enslaved to God," he reminded us (Romans 6:22).

“Never avenge yourselves,” the Apostle urged (Romans 12:19). “If you love those who love you, what reward do you have?” Jesus challenged, then commanded: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:46,48).

For Christians the cross becomes the paradigm for living. Jesus preached, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Paul wrote the Corinthian Christians, who were struggling to get both their theology and their morality right, that Christ “died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (1 Corinthians 5:15). He continued, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation . . . . All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (5:18).

God is re-creating the world through Jesus Christ in the church. As Richard Hays puts it in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, “The church community is God’s eschatological beachhead, the place where the power of God has invaded the world.” Thus he notes, “The church community is a sneak preview of God’s ultimate redemption of the world.” God wills, Paul wrote, that “the life of Jesus be made visible in our mortal flesh” (1 Corinthians 4:11). So Christians forgive, first and foremost, for the sake of Christ.

*Secondly*, Christians should forgive for the sake of others. Contrary to the popular view, forgiveness *precedes* repentance. Typically the question asked is, “Do I have to forgive her if she doesn’t repent?” The better question is, “Can she repent if I don’t forgive?” Here our model and mandate is the cross. No one had repented when Christ cried from the cross, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Such love and grace disarm us. Our cold, hard hearts melt in the warmth of the Son. We repent. We love. But only “because he first loved us” (1 John 4:20).

---

**No Christian is ever in the position of privilege, wronged one or wrongdoer, where he or she is excused from the responsibility of working for reconciliation.**

---

Repentance is a result of God’s forgiveness, not the cause of it. That is, God does not love us and forgive us because we repent; rather we repent because God loves us and forgives us. Paul writes, “God proves his love for us in that while we *still* were sinners Christ died for us” [emphasis mine] (Romans 5:8). Repentance preceded neither God’s love nor Christ’s

atoning death on the cross. Yet the innocent, sinned-against Christ forgave. What the cross teaches us, then, is that reconciliation is the task of the victim. Tim Noel is correct. “The naiveté of that statement is the naiveté of the cross.” Of course, we are uncomfortable with the ethical implications of the theology of the cross. We who are wronged prefer that the villain make amends. Instead, the model of the cross portrays the injured party taking the initiative to restore the relationship. Wrongful injury becomes an opportunity to display the life-changing grace of God.

“God is love” (*agape*), and “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (1 John 4:16; Romans 5:5). What God expects us to be, God empowers us to be: agents of grace and unconditional love. This unconditional love (*agape*) catches the villain off guard. Reconciliation becomes possible. *Agape* is the genius of the cross and the life to which we are called. “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Corinthians 5:19). So, we forgive for the sake of others. Who knows? By forgiving the sinner, he may yet repent and become part of the new creation, or at least be reconciled to us.

Two additional words are necessary at this point. First, while forgiveness from the cross precedes repentance, redemption and reconciliation do *not* result until we accept God’s forgiveness and return his love. In other words, forgiveness is a necessary, but insufficient condition for reconciliation. Reconciliation is always conditioned upon the response of the forgiven. The same is true between persons. Second, no Christian is ever in the position of privilege, wronged one *or* wrongdoer, where he or she is excused from the responsibility of working for reconciliation. God personally can only give us the model of the victim forgiving, since God can only be sinned against. God cannot sin. Therefore, there can be no picture of God seeking forgiveness for having transgressed. Surely, however, when we wrong God or neighbor, we should rush to seek forgiveness. As Jesus directed, “When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). The larger context leaves no doubt that Jesus is placing the initiative for reconciliation squarely upon the shoulders of the wrongdoer. Thus *all* are accountable.

Christians should forgive for the sake of Christ and others, but, *thirdly*, for our sake also. Some might argue that this is a pagan appeal rather than a Christian one. I do not agree. It is certainly true that, as opposed to hedonism and narcissism, Christianity calls persons to deny themselves, to

become other-centered rather than self-centered. However, the biblical call to salvation and godly living often contains a dreadful warning intended to appeal to the best interests of the hearer. In particular, the threat of a fiery judgment in Hell arouses an understandable self-interest. When Jesus, in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35), vows that any one who refuses to forgive a debtor will meet with unspeakable torture, he drives home the point: among other reasons, we should forgive for our sake.

Forgiving is the only way to be fair to ourselves. For only forgiveness liberates us from a painful past to a brand-new future. Not to forgive is to suffer endlessly the torment of yesterday as both present and future are hopelessly overwhelmed and devoured by the past. Only forgiveness sets us free.

Finally, given Jesus' revelation on God's forgiveness of our sins correlating with our forgiveness of others (Matthew 6:14-15), forgiving others offers witness that we ourselves have been forgiven. Forgiveness is not just about the past; it is about the future, in this life and beyond. Always the best is yet to be when we take the Word to heart.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Everett L. Worthington, ed., *Dimensions of Forgiveness: Psychological Research and Theological Perspectives* (Templeton Foundation Press, 1998)—reviewed by Katheryn Rhoads Meek in this volume—is a fine introduction to recent studies of forgiveness. On the place of forgiveness in the Christian life I have found useful: Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (HarperCollins, 1996); H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1927); John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Herald Press, 1986); T. B. Maston, *Why Live the Christian Life?* (Thomas Nelson, 1974); and Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget* (Harper & Row, 1984). My study of the history of forgiveness language in the Bible follows Alan Richardson, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (Macmillan Co., 1966).



**J. RANDALL O'BRIEN**

is Assistant to the President and Professor of Religion at Baylor University in Waco, TX.

# The Purpose of God and the Politics of Salvation

BY DOROTHY JEAN WEAVER

Between two thematic framing devices—Zechariah’s announcement of John’s vocation and Paul’s description of his own vocation—Luke the Gospel Writer paints a vivid portrait of forgiveness as it plays itself out in ongoing and often astonishing interactions between God and God’s people. Here then are the outlines of that portrait, in broad strokes and surprising colors, of “forgiveness” in the writings of Luke.

---

*“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins” (Luke 1:76-77). “But by refusing to be baptized by [John], the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves” (Luke 7:29-30).*

**F**orgiveness. This term lies at the heart of our Christian confession and has done so from earliest days. The ancient words of the Apostles’ Creed put it very simply: “I believe . . . in the forgiveness of sins.” In his introduction to this issue of *Christian Reflection*, Bob Kruschwitz states it as follows: “The Triune God loves us, offers us forgiveness, and seeks our reconciliation. This is the bedrock truth.”

But what does “forgiveness” mean? And who is the God who offers this to us and seeks reconciliation with a stubborn and sinful humanity? And what shape does such forgiveness take? What sorts of actions or

interactions are involved? What does forgiveness ask of God and of humans? And what does it offer in return?

Here Luke/Acts can give us help, for Luke the Gospel Writer is vitally concerned with these questions about forgiveness throughout his two-volume narrative.

From its outset to its conclusion Luke's "orderly account" of Jesus and the early church (Luke 1:1-4; cf. Acts 1:1-2) highlights the theme of forgiveness in persistent and unmistakable fashion. Early in the story Zechariah announces the vocation of his son John "to give knowledge of salvation to [God's] people *by the forgiveness of their sins*" (Luke 1:77, emphasis mine). And near the end of the account Paul describes his own vocation "to open [the] eyes [of the Gentiles] so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, *so that they may receive forgiveness of sins . . .*" (Acts 26:18, emphasis mine). And between these two thematic framing devices Luke paints a vivid portrait of forgiveness as it plays itself out in ongoing and often astonishing interactions between God and God's people. Here then are the outlines of that portrait, in broad strokes and surprising colors, of "forgiveness" according to Luke.

### **FORGIVENESS AS THE PURPOSE OF GOD**

The most important truths in life are frequently the simplest and the most basic. And this is without question the case for Luke and his portrayal of forgiveness. In Luke's words, it is nothing other than God's "purpose" to forgive God's people (Luke 7:30). As Luke sees it, forgiveness is a central focus of God's activity within the human realm. In reflecting on the response of the Pharisees and lawyers who "refuse" John's baptism, a "baptism of repentance *for the forgiveness of sins*" (Luke 3:3, emphasis mine; cf. 1:77), Luke concludes that these religious leaders have in fact "rejected God's purpose for themselves" (7:30). And this divine "purpose" is clearly visible throughout Luke's two-volume narrative, in the words of those who boldly and publicly proclaim God's forgiveness: Zechariah, John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, and Paul.<sup>1</sup>

But if, in Luke's eyes, forgiveness is "the purpose of God" for humankind, it claims this role as the means to a still more encompassing end. As Zechariah puts it, John's mission is to "go before the Lord to prepare his ways, *to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins*" (Luke 1:76b-77, emphasis mine). The ultimate aim of God's intervention within the realm of human affairs is the *salvation* of humankind. The prominence and location of "salvation" language within Luke/Acts leave no room for doubt in this regard. The "salvation" motif is first announced at the outset of the story in Mary's hymn of praise (Luke 1:46b-47) and then picked up in rapid succession by Zechariah (Luke 1:69,

71, 77), the angel of the Lord (Luke 2:11), Simeon (Luke 2:30), and the word of the prophet Isaiah that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:6). Throughout the narrative Luke focuses prominent attention on the “saving” ministry of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> And in the final scene of the story Paul once again restates the “salvation” motif as he declares to the unbelieving Jews of Rome “that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles;

they will listen” (Acts 28:28). As Luke sees it, “salvation” is both the first and the final word in the story of God and God’s people. But as Zechariah makes clear, the necessary route to this salvation, the essential means by which God

---

**Jesus is the prime agent of God’s politics of salvation. This is the “good news” that compels Luke to write. It is also the “scandal” that rocks Luke’s story.**

---

works toward reconciliation with the human community, is forgiveness. “Knowledge of salvation” can come to God’s people only by means of “the forgiveness of their sins”. This is God’s single and all-crucial strategy for “saving” God’s people, a strategy, as it turns out, with profound implications for all parties involved. Framed in the language of societal interaction, forgiveness is, for Luke, neither more nor less than the *politics* of salvation.

### **FORGIVENESS AS THE POLITICS OF SALVATION**

If forgiveness is both the “purpose” of God and God’s strategy for doing salvation, how does Luke describe the character of God’s “politics”? How does God’s salvation strategy function? What is the nature of the interactions involved? A close reading of Luke’s story yields an instructive list of observations.

(1) *Forgiveness is God’s initiative.* If forgiveness is God’s “purpose” for humankind, it is also God’s initiative. Throughout his two-volume narrative Luke portrays forgiveness above all else as an act *of God*, an action that *God* does on behalf of humankind. Each time Luke employs the noun form “forgiveness” (*aphesis*) it refers to the action of God;<sup>3</sup> and in 14 of 18 references to the act of “forgiving” Luke portrays God (or God’s agent) as the actor of the verbal forms (*aphiemi*; *apolyo*) as well.<sup>4</sup> As Luke sees it, the politics of salvation is God’s enterprise. This is foundational reality. It is in fact the “bedrock truth” of which Kruschwitz speaks. And it is clearly “good”. But this is *well-known fact* for all concerned.<sup>5</sup> It is not yet the “good news” of Luke’s story.

(2) *Forgiveness is God’s action through Jesus of Nazareth.* What is new to Luke’s story is that God has chosen to work at forgiveness *through the*



*agency of Jesus of Nazareth.* In the words of Peter, “*God exalted [Jesus] at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins* (Acts 5:31, emphasis mine).” This is the “good news” which compels Luke’s story and drives it forward from beginning to end. At the outset of the story Jesus employs the vocabulary of “forgiveness” to announce his mission (Luke 4:18).<sup>6</sup> Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus proclaims forgiveness boldly to the sick and the sinful, exhibits forgiveness fearlessly in his social interactions, and tells stories persistently about a forgiving God.<sup>7</sup> As he hangs dying on a cross, Jesus calls on God to forgive those responsible for his crucifixion (Luke 23:32-24). And following his resurrection it is the Risen Jesus in whose “name” and by whose authority forgiveness is both proclaimed and received.<sup>8</sup>

There is no question for Luke. Jesus is the prime agent of God’s politics of salvation. This is the “good news” that compels Luke to write. It is also the “scandal” that rocks Luke’s story. When Jesus pronounces forgiveness for a paralyzed man, Jesus’ detractors accuse him of “blasphemy” for daring to assume the prerogative of God: “Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Luke 5:21). Jesus’ table companions at a banquet are equally dismayed by Jesus’ evident presumption: “Who is this who even forgives sins?” (Luke 7:49). And Jesus himself openly acknowledges this “scandal” by pronouncing a “blessing” on those who have “seen and heard” his ministry yet do not “take offense” (*skandalizomai*) at him (Luke 7:22-23).

(3) *Forgiveness is God’s gift to all humankind.* But there is more to the “scandal” of forgiveness. God is for Luke an “equal opportunity forgiver”. The forgiveness that God enacts through Jesus of Nazareth is in Luke’s eyes a universal gift, offered without restriction to the entire human family. To be sure, Luke’s story of God’s forgiveness begins in Jerusalem<sup>9</sup> with God’s “people,” the “Jews” [*Ioudaioi*] or “Israelites,” who view themselves as “children [of] Abraham.”<sup>10</sup> Even here, however, the picture is a universal one, since the “Jews” gathered “in Jerusalem” for Pentecost have in fact come “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5; cf. 2:9-11). And it is precisely back to these “nations” [*ethnoi*], the Gentiles, that the word of God’s forgiveness is ultimately destined in Luke’s story. Luke first sounds this theme at the outset of his story in the words of the prophet Isaiah that “*all flesh shall see the salvation of God*” (Luke 3:6, emphasis mine). And as the story moves forward, the universal character of God’s salvation strategy echoes prominently in the words of Jesus, Peter, the Judean believers, and Paul.<sup>11</sup> God’s forgiveness is for “the Gentiles” (Acts 11:18; 26:17-18), for “all nations” (Acts 24:47), and for “everyone who believes [in Jesus]” (Acts 10:43; 13:39).

And here lies the further “scandal” of God’s politics of salvation.

There are no special privileges in the kingdom of God for the “children [of] Abraham” (Luke 3:8), and no special benefits for the people of “Israel” (Luke 4:25, 27). Instead, as Jesus announces in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18-27), the gift of God’s forgiveness is available universally and without ethnic restrictions. This is nothing short of scandal; and the people of Jesus’ hometown have no trouble recognizing it as such. They respond accordingly, in lynch-mob fashion, dragging Jesus to the edge of the village in order to “hurl him off the cliff” (Luke 4:28-29). But Jesus simply moves through the crowd and walks off (Luke 4:30). And the “politics of salvation” goes on.

(4) *Forgiveness is God’s solidarity with sinners.* As if there were not already sufficient offense associated with God’s strategy of forgiveness, the Jesus of Luke’s story adds daily to the “scandal” by his daring social interactions and the outrageous stories that he tells. The list of Jesus’ public indiscretions is long and vivid.

Jesus socializes regularly with the outcasts of society, the “tax collectors” and the “sinners” (Luke 7:34; 15:1-2), not merely accepting their banquet invitations (Luke 5:27-29) but inviting himself to their houses as well (Luke 19:5-6). He throws all caution to the winds and welcomes the unseemly display of emotion offered him in public by a woman of bad reputation, a “sinner” (Luke 7:39), who bathes his feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, anoints them with ointment, and kisses them repeatedly (Luke 7:36-50). And his stories and teachings are equally outrageous. There is the story about a father who throws a huge “welcome back” celebration for the son who has shamed him and abused his trust by running off and wasting his share of the family estate in wild living (Luke 15:11-32). Another story tells of a tax collector, a self-acknowledged “sinner,” whose prayers for “mercy” have greater weight with God than the prayers of a law-abiding and right-living Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14). And Jesus teaches his listeners about the “Most High” who is “kind to the ungrateful and the wicked” (Luke 6:35). There is seemingly no length to which Jesus, *or the God whom Jesus represents*, will not go to “welcome sinners” (Luke 15:2) and show solidarity with them.

Without question this is a major “scandal” in proper Jewish circles. The religious leaders take massive offense at Jesus’ indiscretions, challenging his actions at every turn.<sup>12</sup> And Jesus himself acknowledges the reputation he has gained among his detractors for being “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34).

But, as Luke tells the story, this “scandal” is itself the very heart of Jesus’ ministry. This is the forgiveness that Jesus proclaims. Jesus’ “scandalous” display of solidarity with “sinners” is in fact the practical outworking of God’s “purpose” for humankind. Jesus has come expressly

“to call . . . sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32) and “to seek out and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). *And this is what it takes to do so.* If Jesus flouts social convention and offends religious sensibilities at every turn, he does so neither by chance nor by malice, *but because this is what it takes to engage in God’s “politics of salvation.”*

(5) *Forgiveness is God’s call to costly repentance.* Solidarity is God’s side of the forgiveness interaction. Repentance is the human side. And the call to repentance echoes loudly and persistently throughout Luke’s story in the words of John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, the Judean believers, and Paul.<sup>13</sup> This call to repentance is a challenging call and not for the faint of heart. It is first of all a call to profound humility before God and open acknowledgement of sin.<sup>14</sup> But it is far more than that. It is a call to radical and costly life changes, the “fruits worthy of repentance.”<sup>15</sup> In Luke’s eyes the call to repentance has clear social and economic implications. It is no less than the call to “do justice” in one’s relations with others. It means sharing one’s coat and food with those who have none, giving one’s possessions to the poor, doing honest business with one’s clients, refusing to extort money from the powerless, and repaying with ample interest those whom one has “defrauded” (Luke 3:11-13 and 19:8). The call to repentance is for Luke a call to a profound reordering of human perspectives, patterns, and priorities.

(6) *Forgiveness is God’s invitation to the banquet.* But in the end it all comes down to celebration. Forgiveness, as Luke portrays it, is nothing less than God’s exuberant and unrestrained joy over “finding” what has been “lost” (Luke 15:6, 9, 32), a joy that demands celebration: “But we had to celebrate and rejoice”

(Luke 15:32). And God will not celebrate alone. The extravagant party which God throws is a celebration intended for all of God’s “friends and neighbors” in the human community: “Rejoice with me, for I have found [what] was lost” (Luke

15:6, 9). And it is a party for which the entire house must be filled (Luke 14:23). This is the bottom line, the ultimate “good news” of Luke’s story: an extravagant and cosmic celebration over God’s reconciliation with humankind. The “politics of salvation” ends up for Luke nowhere else than at the banquet table, with “music and dancing” (Luke 15:25) and the “fatted calf” (Luke 15:23, 27).

---

**The call to repentance is not for the faint of heart. It is first of all a call to profound humility before God and open acknowledgement of sin. But it is far more than that. It is a call to radical and costly life changes.**

---

This is the God “who seeks our reconciliation”. And this is the forgiveness that God offers us. Let the party go on!

## NOTES

1 Thus Zechariah (Luke 1:77), John the Baptist (Luke 3:3-4), Jesus (who announces in Luke 4:18 that “the Spirit of the Lord” has “sent” him “to proclaim release [i.e., “forgiveness”] to the captives” and to “let the oppressed go free” [i.e., “into forgiveness”]); and 24:45-47), Peter (Acts 2:38-39; 3:19-21; 5:30-31; and 11:18), and Paul (Acts 13:32-39 and 26:17-18).

2 Luke 6:9; 7:50; 8:36, 48, 50; 9:24, 56; 13:23; 17:19, 33; 18:26, 42; 19:10; and 23:35; Acts 2:21, 40, 47; 4:9, 12; 11:14; 14:9; 15:1, 11; 16:30, 31; and 27:20; cf. Luke 8:12 and 23:37, 39. See also Luke 19:9, where Jesus announces that “salvation” has come to the house of Zacchaeus.

3 Luke 1:77; 3:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; and 26:18; cf. Luke 4:18 twice.

4 Luke 5:20, 21, 23, 24; 6:37c/b; 7:47a, 47b, 48, 49; 11:4a; 12:10a, 10b; and 23:34; Acts 8:22. Note, by contrast, Luke 6:37c/a, 11:4b, 17:3, and 17: 4, where “forgiving” is the action of humans.

5 Note, for example, the indignant question of the scribes and Pharisees (Luke 5:21): “Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

6 The dual use of *aphesis* in Luke 4:18, translated respectively as “release” and “liberty.”

7 Thus Jesus’ proclamation (Luke 5:17-26 and 7:36-50), social interactions (Luke 5:1-11, 27-32; 15:1-2; 19:1-10; and 23:39-43), and stories (Luke 15:3-7, 8-10, 11-32; and 18:9-14).

8 Luke 24:46-47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; and 13:38-39; cf. 3:19-21.

9 Jerusalem is the implied location of Luke 1:5-79 and the designated location (Acts 2:5, 14) of the Pentecost narrative.

10 Thus forgiveness is for God’s “people” (Luke 1:17, 68, 77; Acts 26:17), the “Jews” (Acts 2:5, 14) or “Israelites” (Acts 2:22, 29; 3:12; 13:16; cf. 2:36; 5:31; and 13:24), and those who view themselves as “children of Abraham” (Luke 3:8).

11 Thus Jesus (Luke 4:18 cf. 4:24-27 and 24:47), Peter (Acts 10:43), the Judean believers (Acts 11:18), and Paul (Acts 13:39; 17:30; and 26:17-18).

12 Luke 5:30; 7:39; 15:2; and 19:7.

13 John the Baptist (Luke 3:8; cf. 3:5), Jesus (Luke 5:32; 10:13; 11:32; 13:3, 5; 15:7, 10; and 24:47; cf. 16:30 and 17:3, 4), Peter (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; and 8:22), the Judean believers (Acts 11:18), and Paul (Acts 13:24; 17:30; 19:4; 20:21; and 26:20 twice).

14 Luke 5:8; 15:18, 21; and 18:13.

15 Luke 3:8; cf. Acts 26:20.



**DOROTHY JEAN WEAVER**

*is Professor of New Testament at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg, VA.*

# To Err is Human; To Forgive...?

BY THOMAS G. LONG

The New Testament is always calling us to do what we cannot do. No, we ourselves cannot forgive, but as we strive to forgive we are given God's forgiveness as a gift. We are not called to create forgiveness; that is beyond us. We are called instead to participate in a forgiveness given to us as a gift.

---

## *Ephesians 4:25-32*

**M**any years ago I was standing at the circulation desk of the library at the seminary where I taught when a friend who works as a pastoral counselor approached carrying a heavy stack of books. He placed them on the desk and began filling out checkout cards.

"What are you doing with all those books?" I asked.

"Research," he said.

"What are you working on?"

"Forgiveness," he replied. "I'm working on forgiveness."

"*Forgiveness?* What are you trying to find out?"

He thought for a moment, and then he said, "I guess I'm trying to find out if forgiveness really exists or not. You know, I don't really see very much of it in my work."

This exchange was, admittedly, somewhat unsettling. What did he mean about "trying to find out if forgiveness really *exists* or not"? Forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian faith. "Father, forgive them," Jesus prayed from the cross. "I believe in the forgiveness of sins," affirms

the ancient baptismal creed. And as the writer of Ephesians urges us, “Forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven you.” If forgiveness does not exist, then what about the gospel, what about the Christian faith? But here was a faithful minister, a good pastoral counselor, a person who spends his days talking with people in crisis, many of whom probably need forgiveness more than anything else in the world, and he wonders before God and everybody else in the seminary library if forgiveness really exists or not.

We have to acknowledge that my pastoral counselor friend has a point. If we are honest, we have to admit that we do not see much forgiveness either, not real forgiveness. Forgiveness in the New Testament sense is not a superficial event. It is not merely a willingness to “let bygones be bygones” or to throw up one’s hands with an “Ah, forget it, life must go on” attitude. In the New Testament, forgiveness is about making what is tragically broken right again. Forgiveness is about a deep healing, a thorough repair of broken relationships, a removal of the poison that destroys love and harmony, a restoration of wholeness and open trust. Forgiveness is saying with utter truthfulness, “The wrong is now righted. I no longer count this against you.”

So where do we see real forgiveness in our world? In the Middle East, we may see an occasional cease-fire or treaty, but forgiveness? In Kosovo, in Rwanda, in Afghanistan, among embittered races and classes, between warring religious groups, bad blood and ancient wrongs endure despite yearnings for peace. The Pope apologizes for the holocaust, the Southern Baptists apologize for slavery, but who could claim that these old and outrageous wounds are now fully healed and the sweetness of trust restored? Like my counselor friend, we don’t see much real forgiveness.

Even in the smaller, one-to-one personal relationships, where forgiveness could be in closer reach, we see precious little genuine, deep forgiveness. Some time ago, I was driving home from work early one afternoon and traveling down a six-lane city thoroughfare, the kind of street every big city has, one thronged with constant traffic and lined with taco stands, hamburger joints, used car lots, and convenience stores. The light at an intersection turned red, and my line of traffic stopped. A knot of teenagers who had just finished the day at a nearby high school started into the crosswalk in front of us. They were in a good mood, cutting up, laughing, and flirting with each other. One girl carried a big boom box radio on her shoulder with rock music blasting out at full volume. You couldn’t miss them.

However, the woman in the pickup truck making a left turn evidently did not see them, because she slammed into the girl carrying the radio with fearsome force. The girl was knocked across the road, her radio

bouncing over the pavement and shattering into jagged pieces. Several of us jumped from our cars and ran over to the girl, who fortunately seemed more bruised and scared than seriously injured. She asked us to call her mother and, between sobs, managed to choke out the phone number. Somebody ran to a pay phone and called the police and also the girl's mother.

The police came quickly, and about ten minutes later another car screeched up to the scene. Out stepped the girl's mother, who ran over to her still weeping daughter, got down on the pavement and held her daughter tightly, stroking her hair and cradling her head in her arms. Soon the woman who had been driving the pickup truck finished speaking to the police, came over to the mother and daughter, and the best way I know to describe what happened next is that the woman stood there and begged for forgiveness. "I am very, very sorry," she said, her lips trembling with fear and grief. "I did not see you. Honest to God, I did not see you. I am so sorry. I am so sorry, I am so sorry."

The mother looked toward the woman, her face tightened in rage. "Our lawyer will be in touch," she said, practically spitting as she spoke.

"I'm trying to find out," my friend said, "if forgiveness really exists or not. You know, I don't really see very much of it."

It is not just over the broad landscape of larger society or in the lives of other people that forgiveness is rare. If we are truthful with ourselves, we have to admit that forgiveness is rare in our own personal experience as well. I teach homiletics, the art of preaching, and one day I walked into my beginning preaching class and told them to prepare to take a test. They were

not expecting this and looked at me apprehensively. "I am not going to grade this test," I reassured them, "but it will be an important test nonetheless." I went on to explain that the test would involve my reading a list of theological words, big doctrinal concepts, and that their job would be to write a paragraph for each word describing how they personally had experienced these concepts. "After all," I said, "good preaching involves

---

**If we are honest, we have to admit that we do not see much real forgiveness. Forgiveness in the New Testament sense is not a superficial event. It is about a deep healing, a thorough repair of broken relationships, a removal of the poison that destroys love and harmony, a restoration of wholeness and open trust.**

---

taking big, sometimes abstract theological ideas and showing how they are flesh and blood realities. So, let's see if you can do this with your own flesh and blood."

I began with the list. "The first theological word is 'hope'." They all started writing. They knew about hope. They wrote about hoping for babies to be born, standing at bedside and praying hopefully for healing, standing at graveside and hoping for joy to rise from sorrow. About hope they knew much.

"The second word," I said, "is 'faith'," and again the pens moved. They had stepped out in faith to come to seminary, walked in faith out of secure careers to become ministers, and faithfully trusted the inner voice that spoke a call to serve. They knew about faith.

I moved down the list. "The third word is 'forgiveness'." The pens stopped writing. When the students did write, they wrote about experiences that were, by their own admission, small, even trivial. A mother's forgiving words over a broken vase, a high school teacher who did not count a bad grade against them, a teammate who said "Don't worry about it" over a missed final shot, that sort of thing. They were preparing to preach the gospel, but one of the central claims of the gospel, the promise of deep, healing forgiveness, was something they had not experienced for themselves. Surely there were in their lives places where forgiveness was needed, possible environments for forgiveness to grow and to flower—broken relationships with parents, pain with a spouse, trouble with children—but they were silent about these arenas. No memory of deep down forgiveness could be found.

"Forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven you," commands the writer of Ephesians. "I'm trying to find out if forgiveness really exists or not," said the pastoral counselor.

There are many reasons, of course, why forgiveness is rare in human experience. To begin with, forgiveness is hard to do. Think about it; if a husband and wife have said hurtful things to each other in a fight and are now positioned at opposite ends of the house, arms folded in a resentful standoff, shooting hateful thoughts toward the other, everybody knows what they need to do. Even they probably know. Of course they need to move toward the middle, toward each other, with arms outstretched and with genuine words of repentance, reconciliation, pardon, and forgiveness.

So what's keeping them? Plenty, as a matter of fact. If forgiveness is to happen, husband and wife must put aside the need for power—the power of being the one who is "right," the power to punish the other for pain inflicted, the power of revenge for harm that has been spoken and done. They must renounce power and assume vulnerability and weakness for the sake of reconciliation, and this is very hard to do. It goes against



almost every human instinct, every emotional impulse. Forgiveness is rare because it is very hard to do.

But there is another and more significant reason why forgiveness is rare in our experience. Forgiveness is uncommon in human experience not just because it is hard to do, but also because it is *impossible* to do. Part of the reality of human life is that each of us has been harmed by other people and has also inflicted harm upon others. Whether this harm is of the sort that gets discussed on the talk shows—such as child abuse, alcoholism, or domestic violence—or whether it is of the more silent and subtle forms, the fact is that our relationships are not whole. This is what it means to be a sinner; this is what it means to be human. Moreover, these slashes in human relationships are not superficial wounds; the damage runs deep. So, if a child has been assaulted by a parent, if a wife has been abandoned by a husband, if a husband has been betrayed by a wife, if a friend has been disloyal, an employer callous, a leader treacherous, or if in whatever of the many ways that such pain occurs someone has done grievous harm to another, ask the wronged persons to be civil to the offenders and perhaps it can be done. Ask them to be kind, and maybe they can muster that up as well. Ask them even not to repay evil for evil, not to exact revenge for their wrongs, and that can at times be achieved. But do not ask them to forgive. Do not ask them to completely heal the relationship, to withdraw all of the

painful memory and to extract any lingering poison. Civility is within our grasp; but forgiveness, true, deep-down, New Testament forgiveness, is not a human possibility.

I know, I know . . . Ephesians says, “Forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” However, if the writer of Ephesians is urging us on like some righteous

basketball coach, “OK team, this time let’s get out there and I want to see some real forgiveness,” then he is wasting his breath. We simply cannot do it. But thanks be to God, this is not what is being said. When Ephesians says, “Forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” this means, in other words, “You can reach out to others with forgiveness because God has already forgiven you. The reality of forgiveness, of sin overcome, of

---

**Do not ask the wounded to forgive. Do not ask them to completely heal the relationship, to withdraw all of the painful memory and to extract any lingering poison. Civility is within our grasp; but forgiveness, true, deep-down, New Testament forgiveness, is not a human possibility.**

---

wounds healed, of wrongs set right, is already yours. Now you have the vocation of living into what has already been given.”

The New Testament is always calling us to do what we cannot do—to love our enemies, to bless those who persecute us, to pray without ceasing, to be perfect as God in heaven is perfect. The New Testament commands us to live these impossibilities because what is impossible with human beings is possible with God; because we are promised that, as we put one foot in front of the other to seek to live out these commands, what is commanded of us is given as a gift. No, we ourselves cannot forgive, but as we strive to forgive we are given God’s forgiveness as a gift. We are not called to create forgiveness; that is beyond us. We are called instead to participate in a forgiveness given to us as a gift. All of our efforts to forgive those who have hurt and wronged us, efforts that are broken, partial, incomplete, and stained, are gathered into the forgiveness that is full, whole, and pure—the forgiveness God gives in Jesus Christ.

Genuine forgiveness takes time; indeed, it takes more time than we have. There are not enough days in a human life for all the pain to be healed; there are not enough years in history for all the wrongs to be righted. Only in God who is eternal, only in Jesus Christ who is “the same yesterday and today and forever,” is there enough time. God has time for human restoration; God takes time to make peace with humanity. In God’s eternal time, all the wounds have been healed and all of the restless, vengeful spite of human harm has been transformed into reconciliation and peace.

So true forgiveness is rare. We see it only now and then; but when we see it, it is a sign of God’s coming future. We experience it only here and there, but it is a foretaste of what is already true about us in Christ. We can even try to work at forgiveness in our lives, not because we can achieve it, but because it has already been achieved for us, given to us freely, and we can participate in that gift of the Spirit.

I heard once about a pastor of an inner city church who had planned a relaxed evening with his wife at a nice restaurant to celebrate her birthday. They met at the church at the end of the day and headed out the door to the parking lot. However, just outside the church they encountered a crisis in progress. An elderly man and his wife had been walking by the church, and the man had evidently suffered a heart attack. He was lying on the sidewalk and his wife was bending over him, frightened and desperate. The minister rushed over to the man while the minister’s wife ran back inside the church to call for an ambulance. The pastor loosened the man’s shirt, reached out for his hand, and said, “Try to relax. We’re right here with you and an ambulance is on the way.”

To the pastor’s surprise and puzzlement, the man looked up at him and

said, "Forgive me, Charlie."

The pastor did not learn until later that Charlie was the man's son and that father and son had been estranged for many years. The pastor squeezed the man's hand reassuringly and said, "I am not Charlie. My name is Sam. I'm a minister and I'll stay here with you until help comes. Don't be afraid."

But the man responded in an urgent voice, "Charlie, *please*. Forgive me."

"I'm not Charlie," repeated the pastor. "Stay calm now, and we'll get you to a hospital soon."

Abruptly the man's breathing changed and his face turned ashen. It was becoming apparent that his condition was very grave and that he would not make it to the hospital. He whispered, "Charlie, I'm begging you. Please forgive me."

It was now clear to the pastor what he must do. He embraced the dying man and said, "I forgive you. I forgive you." A look in the man's eyes signaled that he had heard these words. Then his breathing stopped, and he was gone.

The next day the pastor wondered and worried about what had happened. What right had he to speak a word of forgiveness on behalf of the man's son? The son was not there; father and son were still estranged. What right had he, a stranger, to speak words of forgiveness when the brokenness was still ongoing, when father and son were not reconciled?

Gradually it came to him that his entire ministry, indeed all of the Christian life, is this way. We are always living God's future in a broken present, the gospel is always a word of reconciliation from God's future spoken ahead of its time.

As for the past, God knows and remembers our sin.

As for the future, God remembers our sin as forgiven.

As for the present, "Forgive one another," because God's future has already been given to you as a gift: "God in Christ has forgiven you."



**THOMAS G. LONG**

*is Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology, Emory University in Atlanta, GA.*

This Photo is available in the  
print version of Forgiveness

The artist rivets our attention on the startling mystery of the father's unconditional forgiveness and its momentary effect on all of the characters in Jesus' story of the return of the prodigal son.

---

# A Startling Mystery

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

AND ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

---

**W**hat biblical story first comes to mind when you think about forgiveness? The return of the prodigal son. Luke 15:11-32 describes the well-known scene for us: The younger son has taken his inheritance and squandered it, but now he returns to seek forgiveness. His father is elated! But their joyful reunion dismays the older son who has remained at the father's side both in work and in life.

Artists throughout history, with a variety of media and techniques, shed light on this image of unconditional forgiveness.

Antonio Montauti, trained as a medalist in Florence, depicts the story in this small bronze sculpture. This signed and dated piece, about 25 inches high, is one of 12 bronzes commissioned by Anna Maria Luisa de'Medici. But this sculpture is his masterpiece! It powerfully displays his skills as an Italian Baroque master and as an interpreter of biblical narratives. Florentine artists in the 1720s, especially sculptors, used heightened drama to depict figural groups. Movemented figures and their exaggerated poses increase the theatricality of the event.

Montauti incorporates several different segments of the story into his composition. In the center, the father rushes toward the returning son as if about to embrace him (15:20). This younger son may be asking forgiveness of the father as he kneels before him (15:21). The older son has hastily come in from working in the fields (15:28); his left leg is still extended behind him. A servant, ordered by the father to bring the finest robe (15:22), has just arrived and he offers the drapery in both of his outstretched arms.

What a collision of personalities! The Baroque artist dispenses with linear narrative. He rivets our attention on the drama and its momentary effect on all the characters. The father's startling, unconditional forgiveness is the focal mystery—both for his sons and servant, and for us, the viewers who now observe it.

This Photo is available in the  
print version of Forgiveness

Viewing Adam and Eve's brokenness shakes us: we cannot continue in our dangerous innocence, believing that we can heal ourselves. We continually seek God's forgiveness thanks, in part, to this experience.

*Thomas Cole, American (born England) (1801-1848), EXPULSION FROM THE GARDEN OF EDEN, 1828. Oil on canvas; 39 3/4 x 54 1/2 in. Gift of Martha C. Karolik for the M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815-1865, 47.188. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reproduced with permission. ©2000 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. All Rights Reserved.*

---

# Our ‘Dangerous Innocence’

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK  
AND ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

---

**W**e will welcome God’s forgiveness with an open and humble heart only if we acknowledge and are sincerely sorry for our evil and wrongful acts. Yet the great novelist Henry James believed that Americans suffered from a dangerous Adamic innocence, the conviction that all ills can be cured with a sufficiently ingenious application of human intelligence. In other words, we think that nothing is deeply broken, so we don’t need forgiveness.

Their act of eating from the forbidden tree provokes guilt and anxiety in Adam and Eve and they hide themselves from God’s forgiving presence (Genesis 3:8-11). God’s expelling of the man and woman from the Garden of Eden makes clear the enormity of their betrayal and resulting separation from God. Isn’t this a loving response by God, to show them the truth about their evil? God provides clothing for the couple and cares for them, even in the moment of their shame (3:21).

Artists usually convey the couple’s pain through emotion in their faces or body gestures. Thomas Cole uniquely expresses their sorrow and anguish through the landscape that dwarfs them. God’s presence and enormity is understood by the rock formations surrounding the tiny figures of Adam and Eve. The supernatural light bursts forth onto Adam, Eve and a desolate tree, from a cleft-like area in the center of the composition and directs the couple outward.

Cole was a founding artist of the Hudson River School in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This group of painters used the majestic river valley that originates in lower New York State as the setting for their paintings. In some cases such as this, they wove the landscape into the actual narrative or subject of their work.

Adam and Eve must now contend with those results of sin that we call pain, guilt, and discontent. Viewing their brokenness shakes us: we cannot continue in our dangerous innocence, believing that we can heal ourselves. We continually seek God’s forgiveness thanks, in part, to this experience.

This Photo is available in the  
print version of Forgiveness

How much do we *cherish* God's forgiveness? That question has two sides, as Luke reminds us through the story of a sinful woman's extravagant act of both penance and celebration (Luke 7:36-50). Do we approach God with deep sorrow and repentance for our sin, and do we savor heartfelt joy at God's wonderful forgiveness?



---

# Cherishing God's Forgiveness

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

AND ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

---

**S***acrament of Penance* is titled for the Roman Catholic sacrament (today called Reconciliation) that involves sincere repentance, personal confession, and glad receipt of God's forgiveness. It depicts the moment that Jesus pardons the sinful woman (Luke 7:50).

Nicolas Poussin, a French artist working in Rome, painted the seven Roman Catholic sacraments twice in his lifetime. This painting is part of a second series commissioned by Seigneur de Chantelou in Paris. Ironically the artist never viewed all seven paintings together, as we see them displayed today in one room of the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh. Poussin sent the pieces individually as he finished them to his patron, Chantelou, who revealed each one separately while the others remained behind a curtain. Poussin approved of this method of viewing, and he wrote: "seeing them all together would fill the mind too much all at once." The total graciousness of God, glimpsed through these seven images, overwhelms our hearts and minds!

The event occurs around a foreshortened rectangular table with a pair of gray marble ionic columns between pink marble pilasters opening into a dark courtyard area in the back. A great triclinium surrounds the table on three sides and the guests lean on large white pillows (much as scholars believe a first century meal would be eaten). There are nine servants for eight guests. This is the home of Simon the Pharisee, a wealthy man! He is having his feet washed on the right side of the painting.

On the opposite side of the composition, the woman washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. Simon sits up and turns at the waist to listen and understand Jesus' conversation with the woman. Poussin changes the story: in the biblical text, Jesus discusses the woman's acts (bathing his feet, wiping his feet with her hair, kissing his feet, anointing his feet with ointment) directly with Simon (7:44-46). In *Sacrament of Penance*, Jesus, as a priest, blesses and forgives the woman as she leans over his feet.

The artist invites us, like Simon the Pharisee, to observe Jesus and to wonder how much we cherish God's forgiveness.

# Heaviness of Heart and Conscience

B Y T E R R Y W . Y O R K

---

Heaviness of heart and conscience;  
shadow, haunting still, at noon;  
what can lift this bending burden?  
Does this night have star or moon?

Echos fill the heart and conscience,  
words, once spoken, will not fade.  
What can cease this pressing murmur?  
Silence! What price must be paid?

Friendships lost reveal their treasure.  
Guilt and pain reveal their might.  
Then a Word with sudden freshness  
resurrects the Way and Life.

Hear the word by God's Word spoken;  
hear "forgiven" sung as gift.  
Fresh and brisk the hope and healing;  
feel the breeze as burdens lift.

# Heaviness of Heart and Conscience

TERRY W. YORK

G. DAVID BOLIN

1. Sab-bath sings a qui-et song in ec-ho of God's peace.

Sab-bath prays its si-lent prayer that noise and self will cease.

Sab-bath hears the Spi-rit's voice dec-lare re-fresh-ing truth;

# Worship Service

BY DAVID G. MILLER

---

## *Prelude*

### *The Summons to Worship:*

Leader: Come everyone who is fallen and fractured. Come everyone who is wandering and wondering. Come everyone who is lost and lonely.

**People: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.” We are the fallen and wandering and lonely ones. We have nowhere to turn but to God.**

Leader: Then hear the good news! God is a forgiving God. God’s mighty throne is a mercy seat. In God’s hands are justice and love, and those are the very hands that made you.

**People: “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” God lifts up the fallen; God leads the wanderers home; God loves the lonely.**

Leader: Then come, all of you. Bind your broken hearts together, bind your spirits with those fellow spirits around you, and come now to God.

### *Worship Hymn:*

“Praise, My Soul, the God of Heaven”

### *Morning Prayer:*

**People: O God, slow to chide and swift to bless, we worship you today as God of justice and of mercy. Help us, your children, to model that vital tension in our own lives.**

**Forgive us our failings, we pray, both those things we have failed to do and those things we have failed to refrain from doing. And forgive us, O Most Gracious Lord, when we have failed to forgive those who have failed us, as your son, our savior, Jesus taught us to pray, we boldly say:**

**Our father, who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done on earth,  
As it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
As we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil:  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,  
Forever. Amen.**

Leader: All those who would truly worship God should be free of earthly entanglements. Therefore, during this time of peace, if there are those to whom you should offer forgiveness or if there are those from whom you should request forgiveness, then fulfill the words of your prayer and set each other free with the power of forgiveness.

*The peace of God is exchanged.*

*The Witness from the Old Testament: Psalm 85 and Psalm 86:1-5*

Reader: This is the word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

*Hymn of Reflection:*

“Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive”

*The Witness from the New Testament: 1 John 1:5–2:6*

Reader: This is the word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

*Prayers of the People:*

Leader: The spirit of the Lord be with you

**People: And also with you.**

Leader: Let us pray. Forgiving God who made the world a good and perfect place in which we might grow in knowledge and grace, but we, the human family, soon turned from you, spurning your relationship and hurting each other.

**People: Forgive us, O Lord, and help us to forgive.**

Leader: We continue to create systems and institutions that selfishly seek their own ends rather than the good of the creation and the will of the creator. We join with those systems and institutions, sometimes actively, sometimes silently, to oppress the poor and solidify injustice. In doing so we spurn your relationship and we hurt each other.

**People: Forgive us, O Lord, and help us to forgive.**

Leader: Even in your church, O God, we fight for positions and power. We compare and compromise in order to gain numbers and resources. We become more concerned about our facilities than our faith, and we become more worried about our budget than about our brothers and sisters. Even here we spurn your relationship, and we hurt each other.

**People: Forgive us, O Lord, and help us to forgive.**

Leader: Our families and friendships become battlegrounds of selfishness. Our love is conditional upon performance and prosperity. We use words as weapons and justify ourselves by looking out for ourselves instead of one another. Not only do we fail to love our enemies; we have trouble loving those closest to us. In this area above all, we spurn your relationship and we hurt each other.

**People: Forgive us, O Lord, and help us to forgive.**

Leader: O God, praise be to you, creator, redeemer, sustainer, who can set us free. In your forgiveness help us to find the liberty from systems and institutions, to make peace with poverty of spirit, to lose ourselves in the Christ-like sacrifice of love. O Lord, who set free the woman taken in adultery and who set

free her accusers, set us free with your forgiveness as well  
and challenge us to go and sin no more.

**People:** In your forgiveness, O Lord, give us the freedom to forgive.  
Amen.

### *Presentation of the Offerings*

#### *Sung Response:*

“Forgive Us, Lord”

Forgive us, Lord, and set us free  
To love each other joyfully,  
To worship you abundantly  
To be what we are called to be. Amen.

*David G. Miller*

*suggested tunes:* OLD 100<sup>TH</sup> or TRINITY COLLEGE

© 2001, The Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University, Waco, TX

### *The Witness of the Gospels: John 8:1-12*

Reader: The gospel of our Lord

**People: Thanks be to God**

#### *Sung Response:*

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost;  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,  
World without end. Amen, Amen.

*Unknown*

*suggested tune:* GLORIA PATRI (Greatorex)

### *Sermon*

*Hymn of Response:*

“Heaviness of Heart and Conscience”

*Terry W. York*

*Text and suggested tune, WEBSTER, pp. 42-43 this volume*

*The Departure:*

**Leader:** Those whose lives have been restored, go now into a world still battered and broken.

**People:** **Those whose lives have been healed, go now into a world still sick and sinful.**

**Leader:** Those whose lives have been redirected, go now into a world still drifting and dozing.

**People:** **Go and tell the world this: God forgives. God frees. God fulfills. Repent and believe the gospel. Thanks be to God. Amen.**

*Recessional and Postlude*

---



**DAVID G. MILLER**

*is Associate Professor of English at Mississippi College and Liturgist at Northside Baptist Church in Clinton, MS.*



---

# The Forgetfulness of God

BY BRIAN L. HARBOUR

Perhaps the most neglected doctrine of theology is the forgetfulness of God. But this is the good news of God's word. When God forgives, God forgets. This truth is repeatedly affirmed in Scripture. When God forgives our sin he puts it out of his mind; he erases it from the pages of time; he forgets it.

---

## *Colossians 2:13-14*

**W**illiam Cowper (1731-1800) penned the familiar words "God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform," which were the poet's way of declaring that God deals with things in different ways than we do. Nowhere is this more evident than when we consider the subject of our text: guilt. What we do with our guilt and what God does with our guilt are not the same.

To be sure, we all have guilt to deal with. It's universal cargo in the human heart. Paul Tillich said it is impossible to have both a sensitive conscience and a clear conscience at the same time, for a sensitive conscience is inevitably a guilty conscience. I think he's right. Guilt has always been with us.

Guilt caused Adam and Eve to hide behind the tree in Eden when God came walking in the garden in the cool of the day (Genesis 3). Guilt caused David to cry out, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (Psalm 51:3). When the holy God confronted Isaiah in the temple, it was his guilt that caused him to say, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). When the Pharisees brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus and Jesus responded, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to

throw a stone at her," it was their guilt that caused the accusers to slip silently away (John 8:7).

When a man recently sent \$100 to the IRS and said, "If I still can't sleep, I'll send more money," it was guilt with which he was contending. When Shakespeare had Lady Macbeth cry out, "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten the little hand," it was her guilt by which she was tormented. Guilt is a universal experience of life.

So, what do we do with our guilt? We usually try one of three approaches.

One common approach is to *rationalize our guilt away*. One individual who was stopped for speeding explained to the policeman, "There are so many horrible accidents on the highways that I drive as fast as I can to get away from them quickly." How similarly we try to excuse our sins. Instead of accepting responsibility for what we have done and facing it, we project responsibility for our guilt on someone else. We rationalize it.

Or, we *deny our guilt*. A person who owned a Rolls Royce was on vacation when he experienced mechanical failure. He called the company from which he had bought the car, and they flew in a mechanic from England to repair it. After waiting a number of weeks for a bill, the man wrote to the company in England and asked for a bill for fixing the mechanical failure in the Rolls Royce. He received a telex that read, "We have no record of a Rolls Royce with a mechanical failure." Likewise, we often try to deny our guilt because we don't want to admit that there is a spiritual failure in our lives.

A third response is to *run away from our guilt*. We know it is there. And we know it's our fault. We just try to avoid dealing with it. A man in Chelsea, Massachusetts stole a watch from his neighbor. Conscience stricken by his act, he tried to give the watch away but no one would take it. Finally, he threw it away, but he could not throw away his guilt. For 35 years he tried to get away from it, to no avail. Finally, he sent a letter and some money to his rabbi and asked him to give it to the family from whom he had stolen the watch. He ran for 35 years, but he could not run away from his guilt. Likewise, after we have run as far as we can, we will still hear the haunting footsteps just behind us as our guilt follows incessantly in our pathway.

What do we do with our guilt? We try to rationalize it away. We deny it. Or we try to run away from it. These are usually our approaches to guilt.

How differently God responds to our guilt. Listen to the way Paul expressed it in our text: "God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with

its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:13-14).

What does God do with our guilt? God *faces our guilt*. Notice the cryptic commentary in the last phrase of verse 14. God took our sin upon himself, “nailing it to the cross”. How seldom do we realize the awesome truth that at the cross Jesus, who knew no sin, actually became sin for us.

Picture in your mind again the events of that fateful day. Throughout the night, Jesus had been harassed and ridiculed as he was moved from one clandestine courtroom to another. Finally, Pilate sealed Jesus’ fate when he took the bowl of water and declared, “I am innocent of this man’s blood” (Mt 27:24), and he turned Jesus over to the angry mob. See Jesus as he struggled toward Golgotha. See him as he stumbled beneath the weight of the cross, and as Simon of Cyrene was enlisted to carry the cross for him. See him as the soldiers removed his robe from him and laid him forcefully on the crossed pieces of wood. See him as they put first one spike and then another through the quivering flesh of his precious hands. See him as they put his feet together and fastened them to the wood with a fourteen-inch spike. See him as they raised the cross until it slid into the chasm in the ground and his entire body was jarred. See him hanging for six hours before the ridiculing, mocking crowd. And then realize that as Jesus hung on the cross, all the guilt of all the people of all time was placed upon his shoulders, until, at last, the one who knew no sin actually became sin for us.

Then, as the earth trembled and the skies blackened and that Friday afternoon’s stormy winds began to blow and the veil in the temple split and the centurion cried, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mt 27:54), Jesus exclaimed, “It is finished” (John 19:30).

Note that Jesus did not say, “I am finished.” This was not the cry of despair from a man

whose dreams had been crushed, but the declaration of a man who had met every condition and then with a note of victorious finality declared, “I’ve done it. It is finished.”

What was finished? God’s plan to deal with our guilt. God did not rationalize our guilt away, did not deny it, and did not try to run away from it. God faced our guilt in Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross. God

---

**God did not rationalize our guilt away, did not deny it, and did not try to run away from it. God faced our guilt in Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross. God took our sin upon himself, “nailing it to the cross.”**

---

took our sin upon himself, “nailing it to the cross.”

Then, after God faces our guilt, he now *forgives our guilt*. Don't think it is an easy process by which our guilt is removed because it is not. A price had to be paid. But, here is the point: Christ paid that price. God can deal with our guilt, the Bible says, because on the cross Christ erased “the record that stood against us with its legal demands” (2:14).

John expressed it this way in his epistle: “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). God faces our guilt. And then he forgives our guilt.

But then notice this third step. After having faced our guilt and forgiven our guilt, God is now willing to *forget our guilt*. Paul said in verse 14 that “he set this aside.” He has removed our sin from his sight and has forgotten it.

Perhaps the most neglected doctrine of theology is the forgetfulness of God. But this is the good news of God's word. When God forgives, God forgets. This truth is repeatedly affirmed in Scripture. According to the psalmist, God has removed our sin from us as far as east is from west (Psalm 103:12). Jeremiah predicted that when Messiah came, God would forgive all our iniquity and remember our sin no more (Jeremiah 31:34). Micah said God would cast our sins into the deepest sea (Micah 7:19). Paul told the Roman Christians God would forgive our sins and cover them up (Romans 4:7). When God forgives our sin he puts it out of his mind; he erases it from the pages of time; he forgets it.

The poet was right: “God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform.” In Christ, God faces our sin. Through Christ, God forgives our sin. Because of Christ, God forgets our sin.

So what does this mean for us? A certain notorious character, involved in all sorts of evil deeds, was changed by the grace of God. In the aftermath of his conversion, he took every opportunity to tell the story of how the grace of God had changed his life. On one occasion, just before he rose to speak, someone sent an envelope up to the platform. Opening it, he saw a long list of sins and crimes that he had committed. The unspoken implication was, “What right does a person like you have to stand up and speak for Christ?”

When he saw the note, his first impulse was to leave. Instead, he stepped boldly to the pulpit and said, “Friends, I am accused of crimes and sins committed in this very city. I will read the note to you.” One after another, he read the sins from the list and, at the conclusion of each accusation, he stopped and said, “It is true. I did that. I am guilty.” When he had finished the whole list, he paused a moment and then continued, “You ask how I dare stand before you to speak of righteousness and truth

with a list of crimes like that against my name? I will tell you how: 'In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses'" (Ephesians 1:7).

How will you respond to those who whisper in your ear, "How dare you stand up and claim to be a Christian with a list of sins like that against your name?" Will you allow the accusations to silence you? Will you load up your guilt and sadly walk away? You can do that. Many Christians do. But there is a better way. You can stand up before your accusers and say: "I dare to take my stand for Christ because Christ took his stand for me on the cross." There, God faced my sin. Through Christ, he forgives my sin. And now, praise his holy name, he has forgotten my sin. He has buried it in the deepest sea. He has separated it from him as far as east is from west. He has covered it up. He remembers it no more.

Will you let God be as good to you as he wants to? Give your guilt to God. Lay it at his feet and allow him to take care of it. Then you can begin, perhaps for the first time, to truly experience the forgiveness of God.

---



**BRIAN L. HARBOUR**

*is the Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church in Richardson, TX.*

## ➤ Other Voices ➤

---

So to live a “forgiven” life is not simply to live in a happy consciousness of having been absolved. Forgiveness is precisely the deep and abiding sense of what relation—with God or with other human beings—can and should be; and so it is itself a stimulus, an irritant, necessarily provoking protest at impoverished versions of social and personal relations.

**ROWAN WILLIAMS**, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*

The biblical gospel is not that humans can save themselves inwardly or that whatever happens outwardly is meant to be, but rather that a personal God loves them and that, with divine help, they can freely love others. Human beings are not God, and human sin and suffering are real; to think otherwise is false consolation. That forgiveness and charity can be equally real, however, is the good news that does not grow old. Humans can participate in the grace manifest in Christ, and, being forgiven by God, both give and receive joy. Embodiment of that joy is all that Christian ethics has ever been or will be.

**TIMOTHY P. JACKSON**, “The Gospels and Christian Ethics”

God’s forgiveness of us is essential because without it we are dangerous. Unless we recognize our own need to be forgiven, forgiveness has a violent underside. Immersed in our own sense of controlled self-righteousness, protected from shame through denial, we hotly oppose forgiveness for those we do not want to forgive. In this case, as in the case of the adulterous woman’s accusers, Jesus’ forgiveness awakens our searing hidden shame, and we long to rid ourselves of the One Who Forgives.

**MARGARET G. ALTER**, *Resurrection Psychology*

Jesus is convinced that human beings languish in their need for forgiveness. No matter how obviously guilty or no matter how righteously self-justified they are, Jesus seeks to return human beings to themselves, to their communities, and to God. No individual is too deeply alienated—not Zacchaeus, traitor to his people, nor the woman caught “in the very act of adultery.” Jesus meets these people in their suffering with forgiveness. But Jesus’ compassion extends beyond the obviously shamed

and shameful. He seeks to expose the denied shame buried in a disguise of self-righteousness. He is convinced that no individual is sufficiently self-justified to alleviate this human burden alone. Through parable and confrontation, Jesus holds a mirror before the fragile self-defense of the righteous just as he did with the woman's accusers. In this way he opens an approach for ending their alienation and bringing about their inclusion and return to a different sense of community, to themselves, and to God.

**MARGARET G. ALTER**, *Resurrection Psychology*

We have traditionally understood John 3:16 as a creedal formula. We tend to place the emphasis on the part that says, "Everyone who believes in him . . . may have eternal life." What counts, in terms of faith, is the belief.

However, look again. Embedded in the verse is the story of a parent who gave up a child . . . This sacrificial choice is at the heart of God's search for reconciliation.

I can no longer take John 3:16 as a short formula for salvation. I can only understand it as a foundational principle of reconciliation. It is an ethic based on willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of an enemy. It is an ethic undergirded by and made possible only through the immeasurable love and grace of God.

**JOHN PAUL LEDERACH**, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation*

Everything, therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered to the end that we shall daily obtain there nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. Thus, although we have sins, the grace of the Holy Ghost does not allow them to injure us, because we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but continuous, uninterrupted forgiveness of sin, both in that God forgives us, and in that we forgive, bear with, and help each other.

**MARTIN LUTHER (1483-1546)**, *The Large Catechism*

Not only is it wonderful that God forgives our sins, but also that God neither uncovers them nor makes them stand forth clearly revealed. Nor does God force us to come forward and publicly proclaim our misdeeds, but bids us to make our defense to Him alone and to confess our sins to Him . . . God forgives our sins and does not force us to make a parade of them in the presence of others. God seeks one thing only: that the person who benefits by the forgiveness will learn the greatness of the gift.

**ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (c.347-407)**, *Baptismal instructions (adapted)*

# Forgiveness as a Character Trait

BY ROBERT C. ROBERTS

How do forgiving people ‘see’ those who have wronged them? Do forgiving persons require repentance? Are they moved by the wrongdoer’s excuses or suffering? What relationship do they see themselves sharing with their offenders? Though there is no simple recipe for forgiveness, we can learn how to forgive—by coming to see offenders the way forgiving people do, with “eyes of the heart”.

---

**A**n eye for beauty is a precious thing, and we do well to spend some time and energy on training others and ourselves aesthetically. But even more important is an eye for people. Here too is a kind of appreciation. The seeing is an evaluating, a seeing of good and evil, a seeing that involves attraction or repulsion or some combination of the two, and motivation. Seeing is not just registering on the sensory receptors. This kind of seeing is done with the heart—the “eyes of the heart” as Paul says in Ephesians 1:18, “that you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.” Just as eyes for beauty vary in their power to detect it accurately, so Paul prays that the eyes of the Ephesians’ hearts may be “enlightened,” so that they will see the great and wonderful things of God, which not everyone can see. Much of the teaching work of the church is exactly this project of enlightening the eyes of Christians, of opening them



up to the glories of God and his creation, of forming us so that we can see aright and are not too much subject to the illusions that threaten to beset us by the darkness of our culture and the deformities of our hearts.

### **THE EYES OF THE HEART**

The Christian vision of people has several dimensions: they are possible recipients of our time and goods, sometimes in trouble and in need of help; they are sometimes our competitors, sometimes our bosses or subordinates or colleagues; they are sometimes our benefactors. In all these contexts, seeing people with appreciation is an important part of our Christian formation and governs much of our behavior toward them. But right now I wish to discuss the right seeing of people when they have offended us in some way, when we are angry with them, or anyway within our rights to be angry. For the Christian, “being forgiving” is a good summary of the right formation of the eyes of the heart for such situations.

How do we see people when we are angry with them? Consider a simple case of a person whose moral eyesight for others is not very mature. Jeff is six years old and for the last hour he has been playing cops and robbers with his friend Carl. Jeff is the robber at the moment and after a chase scene of a few minutes Carl ambushes him from behind the shrubbery and tackles him to the ground with a little too much force in his police arrest. Carl has not acted with malice toward Jeff, rather just in the spirit of the game; but Jeff gets the wind knocked out and a skinned elbow. When he gets up he sees Carl with very different eyes. Carl has taken on the character of an offender, a nasty and malicious person, an enemy and someone who deserves to be hurt. Jeff’s impulse is to try to hurt Carl. A fist in the face would do the job, but Jeff is afraid to do that. So he gives him a sulky scowl and says, “I quit. I’m going to tell on you.” Suddenly, at least from one side and for a moment, friendship has disappeared between the boys and enmity taken its place. The vindictiveness galvanized in Jeff’s anger may not last long, or he may nurse his anger a few days, suckling it on sweet rehearsals of the scene of offense and tasty imaginings of revenge. Carl calls him up to say how sorry he is about the skinned elbow and to see if Jeff wants to play. But Jeff does not relent his anger; instead he turns it into a grudge. As long as it lasts, Jeff’s anger has made him blind to Carl’s look of a friend; there is something about Carl that he has ceased to appreciate. That appreciation has been erased and excluded by the “appreciation” of Carl as an enemy.

What is it to be a forgiving person, to have the eyes of one’s heart enlightened for people who have offended against oneself? The deeply forgiving person is one who is sensitive or responsive to five considerations (there may be more) that tend to damp anger in ways

characteristic of forgiveness (we will see that some ways of damping anger are not characteristic of forgiveness).

### **SENSITIVE TO THE OFFENDER'S REPENTANCE**

I said that Carl calls up Jeff and tells him how sorry he is about what happened. This is not repentance, since Carl is not blaming himself for what happened, but merely expressing regret. The story as I have told it illustrates a typical reaction of an unforgiving person, but it does not really depict a situation that calls for forgiveness, since Carl has committed no blameworthy offense. However, Carl's apology has a purpose similar to repentance: to show Jeff that Carl, who had the look of an enemy, is really on his side. Carl is inviting Jeff to see him that way.

If Carl had, with malice, tackled Jeff roughly so as to hurt him, then Carl would need Jeff's forgiveness and not just his sympathy. If he wanted Jeff's forgiveness, it would be very appropriate to speak to Jeff in the following terms. "Jeff, I was being cruel and I take responsibility for intentionally hurting you. I have had a change of heart. I am sorry that I hurt you and now I wish you only the best. And I hate what I did at least as much as you do, and I hate my intention in doing it. I disown myself as I was when I did this, and I hope you will accept me and my apology now." I admit this is a pretty deep speech for a six-year-old; indeed, it is quite a bit more explicit than most adult expressions of repentance, which are often halting and awkward and compromised in their self-severity and leave a lot to be filled in by the generous imagination of the offended. But the explicitness and maturity of the speech brings out why repentance makes such a strong appeal for forgiveness. As we saw, anger sees the offender as alien, an enemy, in opposition to oneself and one's interests. But repentance invites a reversal of that. The offender says, "I'm on your side. I'm my own enemy insofar as I responsibly did what I did. I, like you, hate the me who did that deed. Will you please accept my self-rejection, and thus accept me as I now am?" Repentance invites the offended one not to insist that I am emotionally identical with the offender, and thus to drop his anger against me and restore me to fellowship.

Some people are more open to this kind of consideration than others. By "open" I mean that they tend to be moved by it, that their hearts go out to the repentant one and the eyes of their hearts see not a nasty offender, an alien and enemy, but a fellow human being, a friend, a beloved sister or brother. The unforgiving person is resistant to being moved to new vision by this kind of consideration. He is prone instead to harden his heart and thus to blind himself to the humanity of the offender. But the forgiving person is sensitive and responsive to the repentance of those who offend

him; it strongly “appeals” to him, tending to melt his anger and change his perception. We might wonder what makes the difference between these two characters. The word “love,” in the Christian sense, comes to mind. But perhaps we will become clearer what that means by considering some of the other sensitivities of the forgiving person.

### **SENSITIVE TO EXCUSES FOR THE OFFENDER**

The French have a saying, “*Tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner*”: to understand fully a person’s situation, motivation, and history is to blame him for nothing he does. The reason is presumably that if we could see and appreciate all the factors lying behind the criminal’s crime—his genetic make-up, environmental influences on his development, and the interaction between the current state of his organism and the environmental stimuli to which his deed was a response—we would see that he could not have done otherwise than he did. If we could really dye this doctrine into the fabric of our moral perception, we would never get angry, because anger involves seeing the offender as blameworthy and worthy of punishment. I mentioned earlier that there are some ways of ridding ourselves of anger that are *not* characteristic of forgiveness. This is one of them. When we *completely excuse* an offense, we admit that it is an offense in the sense that it is inconvenient, uncomfortable, or even devastating from our point of view, but it doesn’t require forgiveness because the offender was not to blame. Somebody steps backward painfully onto your toe, but you are fully cognizant that she had every reason to think you were standing elsewhere. When you realize this and give up your anger for this reason, you are not forgiving her, but exonerating her.

Still, excuses are relevant to forgiveness, and the forgiving person is open to finding excuses for his or her offenders. Indeed, the forgiving person actively *looks for* excuses for her offenders. To be relevant to forgiveness, these must be only partial excuses. When from the cross our Lord prays for his torturers, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing,” he is expressing his own forgiving disposition. He is not saying that they are in

---

**The unforgiving person resists being moved to new vision by the offender’s repentance. He is prone instead to harden his heart and thus to blind himself to the humanity of the offender. But the forgiving person is sensitive and responsive to the repentance of those who offend him.**

---

no way blameworthy, but only that they are less blameworthy than they might appear: for example, while they know they are crucifying a man, and perhaps even know that he is innocent, they do not know they are crucifying the Holy One of God.

It is a mark of the unforgiving person that he does not want to hear about excuses for his offender's behavior. If an excuse is offered, he tends to want to refute it. He may even concoct blameworthiness where it is missing. This is why Jeff is a good example of an unforgiving person, even though Carl's deed does not call for forgiveness: Jeff "constructs" the offense as blameworthy, though the situation offers little justification for this, and clings to this construction. The forgiving person is the very opposite: he is open to excuses, looking for them, glad to hear them. Again, the word "love" comes to mind. Someone who cares a great deal about being in a relationship of harmony and beneficent interaction with another person—whether that person is a friend, a family member, a colleague, or a stranger—will welcome the offender's repentance and any excuses that may plausibly reduce the severity of the offense because such repentance and excuses pave the way for reconciliation. So it will come as no surprise that sensitivity to relationships is one of the sensitivities of the forgiving person.

#### **SENSITIVE TO PRIOR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OFFENDER**

You can be quite angry with someone and still care deeply about your relationship to him or her. A mark of the deeply unforgiving person is that being angry makes him willing to abandon the relationship—to start talking about divorce, to start thinking the offender is not worth having as a friend, to take seriously disowning a son or daughter. So we commonly hear relationships cited as reasons for forgiving: "I forgave her because she is my daughter (sister, wife, mother, friend, colleague)." Mentioning the relationship of colleague may raise a doubt: are not collegial relationships a little too far from love relationships to be a real reason for forgiving? When I overcome my anger at a colleague *because we are colleagues*, the real reason is just the practical one that I need to work with this person on a daily basis, and the work is not likely to be very fruitful or pleasant if we are at war with one another.

I think we can forgive people where our reason is that they are our colleagues, but in that case the collegial relationship must not have merely instrumental value to us. It must verge towards friendship. Let us say you work in a real estate agency and in a somewhat underhanded way one of your colleagues cuts in and takes a listing that you had begun to cultivate with the seller. The colleague seems to be sorry she did this, but she does not have the courage to bring out an explicit confession, and you are angry and alienated for a few days. When you see her in the office you avoid her

and she avoids you and you have some nasty thoughts about her and she has that wicked look of an enemy. But you are uncomfortable with the alienation and at some level want to be reconciled with her. One of your main reasons is that you have this collegial relation with her, and it is not going well because of your anger and her guilt. So you begin to smile at her in the office and joke a bit with her in a friendly way at meetings and generally treat her like a good colleague. Are these actions verging towards forgiveness, or not? That, I think, depends on how you are thinking about the reconciliation that you are seeking. If you think of it simply in terms of your comfort, or your productivity as a real estate agent, then even though you overcome your anger toward your colleague, you are not really forgiving her. But if you seek the reconciliation because you value your personal relationship with her (even though that relationship is nothing more than friendly collegiality), then your damping of your anger is a kind of forgiveness.

#### **SENSITIVE TO SUFFERING OF THE OFFENDER**

A moving example of forgiveness motivated by the suffering of the offender is found in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Prince Andrei Bolkonsky's marriage to Natasha Rostov must, at his father's insistence, be delayed a year. Prince Andrei departs for a time, and while he is away the rake, Anatole Kuragin, alienates Natasha's affections and they attempt to elope. The elopement fails, but in Prince Andrei's view it destroys any possibility of marrying his beloved Natasha. Prince Andrei pursues Kuragin to Petersburg and into Turkey with the intention of provoking him to a duel, but does not find him. At the battle of Borodino, Andrei is severely wounded and carried into a tent-hospital where he is laid on one of three tables. On one of the other tables lies a man sobbing and choking convulsively, whose leg has just been amputated. Gradually, Prince Andrei recognizes him as Kuragin.

He remembered Natasha as he had seen her for the first time at the ball in 1810, with her slender neck and arms, with her timid, happy face prepared for ecstasy, and his soul awoke to a love and tenderness for her which were stronger and more pulsing with life than they had ever been. Now he remembered the link between himself and this man who was gazing vaguely at him through the tears that filled his swollen eyes. Prince Andrei remembered everything, and a passionate pity and love for this man welled up in his happy heart. Prince Andrei could no longer restrain himself, and wept tender compassionate tears for his fellow-men, for himself and for their errors and his own.

Forgiveness here is a matter of refocusing the wrongdoer: while “remembering everything”, Prince Andrei switches from seeing Kuragin in terms of the harm he had done him and his desert of punishment—the terms in which he had pursued him for months—and now sees him

---

The forgiving person is moved by the repentance of those who offend her; she is eager to know what mitigates their offenses; she cares about her relationships, wanting them to be harmonious and loving; she is moved by the sufferings of offenders; and she is keenly aware of her own moral failings.

---

benevolently in the suffering and weakness of his humanity. The crisis created by the battle activates a disposition to forgive that neither Andrei nor anyone else knew he had. Note that in this example the compassion seems to work without the aid of the other considerations we have looked at: Kuragin does not repent, nor does Prince Andrei

learn or reflect on any excusing circumstance, nor is Kuragin in any relationship with Prince Andrei that would motivate him to seek reconciliation.

### **SENSITIVE TO MORAL COMMONALITY WITH THE OFFENDER**

The following story is told of the desert father Moses, who before he became a monk lived by robbery:

A brother at Scetis committed a fault. A council was called to which Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to say to him, ‘Come, for everyone is waiting for you.’ So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug filled with water and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him, ‘What is this, Father?’ The old man said to them, ‘My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another.’ When they heard that, they said no more to the brother, but forgave him.

Abba Moses invites his fellow monks to consider their own faults, as a reason to forgive their brother for his sin against them. But how is this a reason? Abba Moses suggests that a sinner is not in a position to judge another sinner. The judge sits in a superior position vis-à-vis the defendant; as judge, he is removed from the defendant, so it is incongruous for one criminal to sit in judgment of another. Anger is a

judgmental emotion. Attitudinally, the angry person takes the superior position, looking down on the one at whom he's angry. Abba Moses gets the council members to see themselves as on the same level as this offender, and their anger evaporates.

The forgiving person is unusually sensitive to these five considerations: She is moved by the repentance of those who offend her; she is eager to know what mitigates their offenses; she cares about her relationships, wanting them to be harmonious and loving; she is moved by the sufferings of offenders; and she is keenly aware of her own moral failings. These sensitivities of the heart give the forgiving person a special eye for people when they do nasty things.

## NOTES

A few paragraphs of this paper are borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from my paper "Forgivingness", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1995): 289-306. I thank the editor for permission to use the material. I give a fuller account of the virtue in this earlier paper; in particular, I explore the conditions under which the forgiving person withholds forgiveness.



**ROBERT C. ROBERTS**

*is Distinguished Professor of Ethics at Baylor University in Waco, TX.*

# God's Repentance-Enabling Forgiveness

BY RALPH C. WOOD

It is the Easter event—the Father's gracious rejection of our dreadful rejection, the Son's awful assumption of the world's entire burden of sin, the Holy Spirit's infusion of forgiveness into our lives—that provides our only hope for repentance. A Flannery O'Connor short story shows this extravagant claim is not mere theological word-play, but a matter of life and death.

---

**V**oltaire famously declared, “God forgives because it’s his business.” The great atheist could refer blithely to the God in whom he did not believe because he also had contempt for the chief Christian virtue. Mercy and pity and forgiveness are not the traits of heroic peoples and cultures. The Greeks, for example, sanctioned pity only for the weak and the helpless, never for the strong and the guilty. Thus did Voltaire aim to trivialize forgiveness by turning it into something automatic, making it a matter of rote, thus denying it any real significance. Yet the old skeptic spoke more truly than he knew. In the profound original sense of the word, forgiveness is indeed God’s *business*: his essential occupation, his constant activity, his diligent engagement—indeed, his very nature. Thus it is meant to form our fundamental character as Christians.

## **GOD'S FORGIVENESS PRECEDES REPENTANCE**

The common assumption, found even in the most standard textbooks and dictionaries of theology, is that our forgiveness remains conditional



upon our repentance: first we repent, and then God forgives. The word “repentance” means literally a turning back, a reversal of one’s course. Only when we do a moral and spiritual about-face, according to this understanding, can we expect God’s mercy. Many biblical texts seem to speak this way. Jesus himself declares, in his Model Prayer, that unless we forgive others, we ourselves have no hope of forgiveness. So do the Hebrew prophets warn that elaborate sacrifices will not win mercy from God, unless they are preceded by broken and contrite hearts. “I hate, I despise your festivals,” declares Amos. “Take away from me the noise of your songs.” God desires not such symbolic acts of repentance, the prophet thunders, so much as ethically transformed lives: “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:21).

Yet this way of reading these texts often leads to moralism and atheism. It makes our forgiveness contingent upon our good deeds, as our acts of repentance form a necessary symmetry with God’s mercy. It is not difficult to see how moralism issues in atheism. If our own prior action is the real *sine qua non*, then God is eventually rendered redundant. Yet there is another and drastically opposed way of construing not only these particular texts but the whole biblical tradition as well. It insists upon the paradoxical reversal of the seemingly obvious order: we repent, not in order to *be* forgiven, but because we have already *been* forgiven. The Psalmists, for example, take endless delight in the Law of the Lord; it is God’s gracious and merciful provision for Israel, not a grinding requirement to which she must reluctantly submit. Only because God has already shown Israel his boundless mercy is she called to be his people living in high moral excellence. Amos is angry because his people have not lived out the radical ethical consequences of God’s forgiveness. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer was to complain in the 20<sup>th</sup> century about modern Christians, the ancient Israelites had cheapened God’s abundant grace into an excuse for their own moral laxity.

The New Testament pattern is very much the same. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus approaches the paralytic and tells him, to the great astonishment of all, that his sins are forgiven. The poor man had not sought forgiveness but healing! It seems evident that Jesus is interested in how the paralytic will live, now that his health has been restored—whether he will be satisfied with mere wellness (as we call it) or whether his forgiveness will produce a transformed life of *metanoia*, of true repentance and conversion. So it goes in John’s gospel, with the woman who has been caught in adultery. Jesus tells her that her sins are forgiven, and then he instructs her to go and sin no more. Her new freedom is conditional upon her forgiveness, therefore, not upon her repentance. Jesus has set her free for

an endlessly penitent life—not only asking forgiveness for her past sins, but also for the sins that she shall surely commit (even if ever so much more reluctantly) in the future. The supreme example of this priority which forgiveness holds over repentance is found in Christ's own words from the cross. He asks God to forgive those who are crucifying him, not because they have repented and begged his mercy, but because he wants to

break the chain of vengeance that has entrapped them. If he curses them, by contrast, then the vicious cycle of unrepentance will remain forever closed.

Luther and Calvin were so convinced about the rightness of this

---

**The Gospel would not be Cheering News but Ill Tidings indeed if it were anything other than God's gracious and unmerited and repentance-inducing forgiveness.**

---

paradoxical forgiveness-enabling-repentance sequence that they employed extravagant metaphors to emphasize it. When confronted by fierce temptation, for example, Luther seized a piece of chalk and scrawled out the words *Baptizatus sum* ("I have been baptized"). That he had been baptized made him the property of the God who had already done penitence for him. It meant that alien and demonic powers could not overtake him, try as they might. Luther also insisted that sin consists not in adultery or theft or even murder, but rather in unbelief—in the refusal to entrust our lives wholly to the God who has entrusted himself to us. Yet it is exceedingly hard, Luther added, to discover this most fundamental of all facts. We cannot learn the true meaning of sin by beholding horrible instances of evil—for example, in our own era, by looking at Auschwitz or Rwanda or Hiroshima or My Lai. These are the consequences of sin, but not sin itself. Sin is truly discerned, said Luther, only at a single place: at Golgotha. The humiliation and crucifixion of Jesus is the one sin that measures all other sins, the sin that reveals the full and total desperation of human existence.

Yet it is precisely the Easter event—the Father's gracious rejection of our dreadful rejection, the Son's awful assumption of the world's entire burden of sin, the Holy Spirit's infusion of forgiveness into our very lives—that provides our only hope for an utter about-face, for total transformation, for conversion and repentance. Calvin declared, along these same lines, that we utterly misread the gospels if we misconstrue their report about how Jesus and John the Baptist called people to repentance because the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. The real theological order is exactly the reverse. Because the Kingdom of

forgiveness was *already* at hand, said Calvin, they *therefore* summoned everyone to repentance. The Gospel would not be Cheering News but Ill Tidings indeed if it were anything other than God's gracious and unmerited and repentance-inducing forgiveness.

Among all modern theologians, surely it is Karl Barth who has most clearly emphasized the radically asymmetrical relation of forgiveness and repentance. Whether apocryphal or not, there is a splendid Barthian story that illustrates the point. It is reported that Barth was once asked what he would say to Hitler if he ever had the chance to meet the monstrous man who was destroying Europe and who would ruin the whole world if he were not stopped. Barth's interlocutor assumed that he would offer a scorching prophetic judgment against the miscreant's awful politics of destruction. Barth replied, instead, that he would do nothing other than quote Romans 5:8 to Hitler: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Only such unparalleled mercy and forgiveness, such unstinted Gladness, could have prompted the Führer's genuine repentance. To accuse him, though justly, of his dreadful sins would have prompted Hitler's self-righteous defense, his angry justification of his "necessary" deeds.

Here we see the precise relation of God's anger and mercy. William Law, the English devotional writer of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, put their order exactly right: "God gets angry only if we will not be happy." Rather than negating his justice, God's love intensifies it. Divine wrath, as Barth repeatedly insists, is made all the more furious for resting on divine mercy. We know the terrible extent of our sin exactly and precisely to the terrible extent of God's forgiveness. Hence Barth's insistence on the stunning paradoxes of the Gospel. God imprisons us, says Barth, by flinging wide our cell door. God's judgment "accuses [man] by showing him that all the charges against him have been dropped. It threatens him by showing him that he is out of danger."

#### **FLANNERY O'CONNOR ON GRACIOUS FORGIVENESS**

These extravagant claims are not matters of mere theological word-play. That they are matters of life and death is borne out in Flannery O'Connor's short story entitled "The Artificial Nigger." There an old man named Mr. Head and his grandson Nelson are living in a remote rural section of northeast Georgia. They are so isolated from any larger community that they should live in blessed dependence on each other. Instead, both man and boy are consumed by an enormous willfulness, each proudly determined to dominate the other. Though these two rustics have never heard of Friedrich Nietzsche, their ruthless will-to-power—their desire of each to subject the other to his own desire—lies at the heart of modern nihilism. It is also the essence of the unbelief that Luther saw as

lying at the core of Original Sin.

Mr. Head decides to take young Nelson to the city in order to destroy any longing to leave the farm, making him want instead to remain at home and perhaps to care for him in his old age. The city is an alien and forbidding place, Mr. Head is determined to show him, full of “niggers” as well as other unsavory figures and scenes. As Mr. Head delights in reminding Nelson, he has never even *seen* a “nigger.” No sooner have they boarded the train bound for the city than a large coffee-colored Negro strides majestically past them. One hand resting on his ample stomach, the black man uses the other to lift and lower his cane in a slow, kingly gait. With his neat mustache and his yellow satin tie, his ruby stickpin and sapphire ring, this elderly Negro exhibits all the signs of prosperity. Yet in the still-segregated South, he is not free to live according to his means; he is required, instead, to sit in the colored-only carriage at the rear of the train. Despite the injustice done to him, the Negro retains an air of serene dignity and grace.

Once the man has walked past them, Mr. Head asks Nelson what he has seen, knowing that the boy has never before encountered a Negro. “A man,” Nelson truthfully replies. “What kind of man?” his grandfather asks again. “A fat man,” Nelson answers, and then more cautiously, “An old man.” “That was a nigger,” Mr. Head gleefully declares, humiliating Nelson in his ignorance that the skin-color of Negroes can be tan as well as black. Nelson is at first infuriated at his grandfather for this heartless trick, but then he turns his rage against the black man himself—blaming him for the racial hatred he has just learned.

O'Connor’s story shows that bigotry is not native but acquired, for Nelson has had to learn how to hate this black man who had meant him no harm. But the story cuts far deeper than well-worn truths about the universal human family learning to accept each other’s epidermal differences. The story is concerned primarily with reconciliation and forgiveness, as becomes evident in the following scene. Lost in the maze of the city’s streets, Nelson and Mr. Head stumble into a black ghetto. The boy asks for help from a large Negro woman leaning idly in a doorway. It is not physical direction alone that the frightened child desires. He wants a far profounder kind of succor and guidance. And so he finds himself wishing that this giant Negress would draw him to her huge bosom, hold him tight in her arms, breathe warmly on his face, while he looked “down and down into her eyes.” Though the adolescent Nelson’s longings are vaguely sexual, his far deeper feelings are religious. He wants to collapse in supplication before this black Madonna. Yet he dare not confess to his grandfather such desire to surrender his proud independence. Their contest of wills is far too fulfilling for them to discern in this black woman

a feminine image of their redemption.

In a final act of perfidy, Mr. Head decides to humiliate Nelson into total, abject dependence by hiding behind a trash bin after the exhausted boy has fallen asleep on a sidewalk. He knows that when Nelson rouses he will eagerly, even desperately seek his grandfather's solace. Instead, the newly awakened child, running wildly in his terror, knocks down a woman who is carrying a bag of groceries. She in turn threatens legal action and screams for the police, just as Mr. Head rushes to the scene. In clear repetition of Peter's denial of Jesus, and in declaration of his own self-interest, the old man thrice disavows any knowledge of the boy. Nelson is devastated: this is treachery beyond all bounds. Yet no sooner has Mr. Head committed his awful deed of denial than he recognizes the horror of it. He all but begs for the boy's forgiveness. If Nelson would only grant it, they could at last meet on the common ground of their confessed need. Instead, the child refuses to pardon the old man, knowing that he now has acquired the ultimate power over him. Thus does the sin of duplicity and betrayal occasion a far worse evil: the refusal of forgiveness. From having been horrified at the sin his grandfather had committed against him, Nelson now luxuriates in it. His "mind had frozen around his grandfather's treachery as if he were trying to preserve it intact to present it at the final judgment."

Flannery O'Connor has taken her readers into the very abyss of evil, making us ask how such a tangled knot of recrimination and self-justification could possibly

be cut. It happens when, lost yet again in the city, grandson and grandfather wander into a white suburb. There they discover an artificial Negro in front of an elegant home. This degrading image of black servitude is supposed to be a smiling and carefree "darker". But he has a

---

Though they have never seen a crucifix,  
Nelson and Mr. Head would probably know the  
gospel song entitled "The Old Rugged Cross".  
And so they find themselves strangely  
transfixed by the artificial Negro, this  
"emblem of suffering and shame".

---

chipped eye, he lurches forward at an awkward angle, and the watermelon he is supposed to be eating has turned brown. "It was not possible," declares the narrator, "to tell whether the artificial Negro were meant to be young or old; he looked too miserable to be either." It is extremely unlikely that Nelson and Mr. Head have ever seen a crucifix, but they would probably know the gospel song entitled "The Old Rugged Cross".

And so they find themselves strangely transfixed by this “emblem of suffering and shame”. A racist image meant to signal white mastery over black people, it has unintentionally become a sign of anguish patiently and graciously borne. Before it, the mutual sins of the young boy and the old man begin mysteriously to melt away. “They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy.”

O'Connor gets the order of redemption exactly right. Nelson and Mr. Head have discovered something far deeper than the means for overcoming the evident evils of racial hatred and discrimination. They have found something immensely greater: the forgiveness that is the single solvent for all evils. Thus will they be able to repent of their sins and to forgive each other only because they have themselves first of all been forgiven. They were locked in a battle of wills that could never have been broken by any self-prompted act of relinquishment, until they encountered God's sin-breaking forgiveness in Christ. Restored to right relation with God, they are on the way also to right relation with each other. “When we forgive someone,” declares Michael Jenkins, “we are saying that we stand side by side with them as sinners under the mandate of the God who forgives all.” Karl Barth saw this truth with his usual acuity when he declared that God's mercy is the one cause for both our daily rising up and our final lying down. “Every day we ought to begin, we may begin with the confession: ‘I believe in the forgiveness of sins.’ In the brief hour of our death we shall still have nothing else to say.”

---



**RALPH C. WOOD**

*is University Professor of Theology and Literature at Baylor University*

---

# Failing Leaders

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

Forgive Christian leaders who betray us? Nothing tests our resolve to forgive like these spiritual disasters.

---

**S**piritual cairns mark our Christian journey. Like the small piles of rocks that hikers place along an alpine trail, they record our important turnings and remind us of how we came to our present view on the world. Some are Ebenezer stones showing where “The Lord helped us”: memory of baptismal waters, a mission trip that sparked a vocation, loving a life-long spouse, meeting a dear friend and colleague, dedicating to God a newborn child. Other cairns, however, record our spiritual setbacks. Too many of these were placed to mark the painful memories of when trusted Christian leaders failed us.

I remember the Saturday night as a young boy when my dad told me that FBI agents had arrested Mr. Covey, my Sunday School teacher and a gentle man who had led me to personal faith. He went to prison for theft, though some church members thought it was more like treason to steal from the army warehouse where he worked during those chaotic Vietnam War years. That’s an old marker along my path. Others record recent betrayals that are difficult to talk about. For many Christians, cairns mark tragic memories of a leader’s failure that went far beyond betrayal to personal threat and abuse.

We celebrate with others those Ebenezer stones along our pilgrimage. But what do we do about the hurtful, “failing leader” cairns? We wonder, of course, why do these Christian leaders fail, betray, or abuse us? Perhaps in personal confession, we also question if we, in turn, are failing those leaders by not standing ready to forgive, heal, and restore them.

The headline-grabbing moral breakdowns by Christian public figures and celebrated ministers—from Jim Bakker’s thievery to Jesse Jackson’s adultery—are not “disasters”. We handle their failures easily because we stand at an impersonal distance from these men: they don’t confess to us or require tough forgiveness from us. We are scandalized, but the shame,

flowing over denominational and theological boundaries, even unites us with other Christians. The disasters are local: our pastor sexually exploiting a church member, a minister stealing from building funds, deacons constantly tearing members down, a teacher flashing habitual bursts of temper, or a worship leader disguising substance abuse. The terrible becomes the worst if the wrongdoer is “a local saint”—a Christian who leads by example, whose judgments carry weight, and whose life we desire to emulate. Our pain is more personal; our shame, grief, and anger are deep and smoldering. Our feelings often go unshared. We blame and distrust fellow church members, and fissures hidden just below the surface of congregational life split wide open into cliques and divisions.

### **WHY DO CHRISTIAN LEADERS FAIL US?**

In fallen leaders, Richard Irons and Katherine Roberts usually find a potent mixture of power and woundedness. Irons and Roberts, medical doctor and priest, minister to sexually abusive professionals and clergy, but their insights may apply to a wider group of failing Christian leaders.

The first ingredient is power. Pastors, deacons, teachers, and other Christian leaders have a lot of it. They have ministerial authority, God-given and welcomed by us, to be agents through whom God can work in our lives. In worship, Bible study, and counseling they witness to divine authority and are representatives of God to us. They also have power that we grant to them as our caregivers, when we make ourselves properly vulnerable before them. Our feelings for them may even go a bit haywire: we may treat them as our parents or spouse (which psychologists call “transference”), or make them out to be heroes on a pedestal.

The other ingredient is woundedness. “Over 80 percent of sexually exploitive professionals” whom they have treated, say Irons and Roberts, “were victims of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, emotional incest, or profound abandonment as children or adolescents”. Now in positions of social power, these “unhealed wounding” fail to recognize the significance of personal boundaries or they intentionally cross over them. Irons and Roberts delineate six patterns of failing leaders. The most common types are unintentionally hurtful—like the *naïve prince* who mistakenly believes that he is morally invulnerable; if, in relationship with someone who trusts his leadership, his repressed wounds are expressed and the other person responds, he develops inappropriate closeness and ‘discovers’ that he has violated personal boundaries. Or the *wounded warrior* who lacks self-worth and affirmation from friends and family; when a dependent person responds to his unhealed wounds, he accepts the inappropriate closeness and violates boundaries with that person. Some, but many fewer, failing leaders verge toward cruelty—like the *self-serving martyr* who seeks the refreshing personal attention of persons whom he leads; he feels that he



has done so much for others, that now he demands inappropriate favors from them. Or the *false leader* who intentionally crosses personal boundaries, enjoying the drama and thrill of controlling others; and the extreme (and thankfully, uncommon) charismatic *dark king* who carefully chooses his victims to dominate. A very infrequent type is the *wild card* whose abusive behavior is a symptom of some mental disorder.

From unintentional stumblers to cruel abusers, failing leaders often have been damaged by “estrangement or feelings of abandonment”. Irons and Roberts do not draw this point in order to excuse their betrayal and abuse, but to give us hope that we may participate in their healing. Exploitive leaders need “to ask for and accept the forgiveness of God and others and to reestablish a relational quality of life that reflects a personal relationship with God that influences and frames his life”. Through our instruction and reconciliation efforts that hold failing leaders accountable, we may be instruments in their forgiveness, healing, and restoration.

#### **WHAT DOES CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS REQUIRE OF US?**

We hardly feel up to the task to “bear one another’s burdens” or moral failings, as the Apostle Paul instructs, rather than heaping additional suffering and shame upon one another (Galatians 6:1-2). We don’t *want* to “restore [leaders] in a spirit of gentleness”, especially if they were a *false leader* or *dark king*. Yet, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion,” Paul disciplines us as a community. “Forgive [plural] each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive” (Colossians 3:12-13).

Paul was not a Pollyanna; he knew how extraordinary it is to live in a mutually forgiving community. Forgiveness flows from one member to the next, and does not stop at the community’s perimeter. Metaphors tumble out in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 to describe it. It is like seeing other folks with fresh, Christ-like eyes: “we regard no one from a human point of view.” The world becomes brand new again: “there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” It is like God making us “ambassadors for the Messiah”, empowered to continue God’s work, through Jesus, of “reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them”. Behind Paul’s metaphors lies this truth: forgiveness is incredibly difficult, both to offer to others and to receive to ourselves. A “ministry of reconciliation” will never be natural to us; it will require that we get new eyes and a divine appointment. It will be a work that we neither initiate nor can sustain. The forgiving community will arise and reconciliation will flow from one person to the next only because “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ”.

Even if we manage to *forgive* abusive leaders, to *restore* them makes us very uneasy. We breathe a bit easier when John Paul Lederach says that

restoration does not mean “going back to what was”, because we do not really want the fallen leader to be leading again; but then he continues, restoration requires “healing . . . and bringing about what should be”. Are we obligated to restore the fallen leader to another position of leadership in the community? Marlin Jeschke gets it right when he says, “it may be necessary to exercise discretion in appointing restored persons to office,

---

**As a church we will see failing leaders as morally blameworthy for wrongdoing, yet we will overcome our anger and invite them to repent, be healed, and included again within God's forgiving community.**

---

just as in the appointment of new converts to office. Such appointment should be by virtue of spiritual fitness, not automatic reappointment.

However, it is inconsistent with forgiveness to hold truly restored members in a state of perennial

disgrace. It is inconsistent with forgiveness to make them ‘pay’ with continued humiliation or to put them on any other ‘probation’ than that under which all believers live all the time.” Even if in “spiritual fitness” we include that leaders be “well thought of by outsiders” (1 Timothy 3:7), forgiveness still requires that the church treat restorees with the same grace extended to new converts.

### **WHY ARE WE FAILING OUR LEADERS?**

We do not bear with them to confront their sin, work on repentance, and be restored to faithful service. Why are we failing our leaders? David Augsburgers believes that Christians, too much influenced by modern culture, seek and settle for superficial reconciliation: “Forgiveness becomes equated with live-and-let-live tolerance, acceptance, and ‘love’—rather than absorbing the hurt and building bridges of understanding.” We follow our culture in privatizing all moral behavior and thinking that the church has no business “sticking its nose” into what leaders define as their private lives. Marlin Jeschke places the blame closer to home, in our disorganized congregational structures. Many congregations lack any practice to forgive, heal, and restore fallen leaders. Perhaps they fear repeating past mistakes in unloving church discipline; or they have simply discarded hierarchical models of authority (members being watched by pastors) and not adopted collegial models of accountability (members being spiritually responsible to one another). In a few congregations, revivalism is a distorted replacement for restoration: fallen leaders become targets to be ‘saved’ again in the next cycle of revival. More likely, taking advantage of our Christian disunity, an abusive leader just goes

across town and joins another congregation, which pays no attention to appeals from the victimized one.

To these insightful diagnoses, I would add another: it simply hurts too much. Our injuries, in these spiritual disasters, go far beyond betrayal or the breaking of a trust relationship—because Christians belong to one another in more than a voluntary, extrinsic way. Think of it this way. When betrayed by a trusted employee, we are deeply hurt, but say, “We will hire another person—and more carefully this time—to do the job properly.” When a local Christian leader fails, it is like losing an arm or leg, or a vital organ. Pauline language of ‘membership’ is on target: we were “called to belong to Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:6) and this makes us “members *one of another*” within the body of Christ (12:5, my emphasis). When the leader fails, it is akin to something inside us dying. In Wendell Berry’s *Jayber Crow*, the title character glimpses his small town as a membership in the Pauline sense:

What I saw now was the community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection. There had maybe never been anybody who had not been loved by somebody, who had been loved by somebody else, and so on and on . . . . It was a community always disappointed in itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing and yet always preserving a sort of will toward good will. I knew that, in the midst of all the ignorance and error, this was a membership; it was the membership of Port William and of no other place on earth. My vision gathered the community as it never has been and never will be gathered in this world of time, for the community must always be marred by members who are indifferent to it or against it, who are nonetheless its members and maybe nonetheless essential to it. And yet I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another’s love, compassion, and forgiveness, as it is said we may be perfected by grace.

Only when we similarly glimpse our local congregation as a membership, will we diagnose our injuries for all that they really are—the detectable scarring of a hidden destruction.

#### **HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO FAILING LEADERS?**

Restoration practices usually fit these models: spiritual care team, denominational, or congregational approach. Only a combination of these can resist the distortions of modern culture and honor the nature of our injuries. First, let me describe each approach in its “pure” form.

In the *spiritual care team approach* the fallen leader assembles a team of four to six spiritually balanced men and women whom he respects. Drawn from his congregation or wider network of Christian friends, they guide him, hold him accountable, and care for him and his family. The pastor is not a team member (the restoree and his family continue to need the pastor to fulfill the pastoral role with them), but a professional therapist may be added to coordinate advice. The team meets quarterly with the restoree for two to three years, providing him direction about church involvement, work, rest, and exercise; reminding him of the issues involved in his failing, but helping him to deal with discouragement; calling him to faithful obedience; and encouraging a new openness, a new teachability. After this period of formal restoration, the team provides aftercare as appropriate: requiring ongoing accountability, monitoring attitudes and behavior, handling rumors and building bridges back to the community, monitoring rebuilding within the family, and providing ongoing prayer support.

The *denominational approach*, which usually applies only to clergy, begins with the leader surrendering pastoral credentials to the denomination. An official or committee then prescribes a fixed period of study and counseling, which is monitored by quarterly progress reports or meetings with the restoree. The restoration may be divided into stages of no ministry, followed by volunteer service, then supervised employment, and so on. The denomination keeps rehabilitation records and, at the proper time, restores the leader's credentials.

The *congregational approach* follows the "threefold admonition" in Matthew 18:15. First, one goes directly to the person who has failed morally. If acknowledgement and repentance are not forthcoming, the next step is to seek additional counsel with wise persons respected within the congregation—to clarify the facts in order to prevent false charges, discern the attitudes of all parties involved and prevent mere personality clash, and determine whether the problem is a serious spiritual matter. A series of small-group meetings may be required. The third admonition, if required, is before the congregation, which, writes Jeschke, "is essential at this stage because the issue has become nothing less than membership itself. This issue, like baptism, is by nature congregational, since it bears upon the relationship of every member of the congregation to the person under discipline." Though it may be formalized to some extent, the suppleness of this approach, Jeschke remarks, is consonant with "the very purpose for which it was formed—namely, to present the claims of the gospel", which "is always a personal appeal."

Each approach has its limitations. The *congregational approach* provides the best framework to heal an injured congregation and nurture it in its Christian responsibilities for community discernment and offering restoration to the fallen leader. Yet a congregation may not have the

spiritual or professional resources required; the restoree may move across town or across the country from the congregation; and this approach may not provide continuing spiritual care to the restoree and his family—too often, the congregational process stops at judgment and does not carry through to restoration. The *denominational approach* provides those needed resources (at least for *clergy*), but by professionalizing spiritual care it fails to address the local congregation's injuries or encourage the congregation's responsibility. The *spiritual care team approach* provides the best care to the restoree and his family, but can it address the congregation's injuries?

A more adequate practice would combine the strengths of the congregational and spiritual care team approaches. I call this a *friendship-church team approach*. Congregationally endorsed spiritual care teams, flexible enough in composition to care for fallen clergy or lay leaders, would enrich the congregational approach. Team members would come from the congregation or "friendship churches" – other congregations of the same or another faith tradition, nearby or in distant places, with which the injured congregation's members have built networks of trust. And friendship-church teams would have more inclusive goals: not only would they care for the restoree, they would care for the injured local congregation by convening it, when possible and at an appropriate time, to give its approval to the process and its results through a restoration worship service for the restoree.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Richard Irons and Katherine Roberts, "The Unhealed Wounders", is in Nancy Myer Hopkins and Mark Laaser, eds., *Restoring the Soul of a Church: Healing Congregations Wounded by Clergy Sexual Misconduct* (Liturgical Press, 1995), pp. 33-51. Earl Wilson, et al., *Restoring the Fallen: A Team Approach to Caring, Confronting and Reconciling* (InterVarsity Press, 1997), presents the team approach. Marlin Jeschke, *Discipling in the Church: Recovering a Ministry of the Gospel*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Herald Press, 1988), is the best resource for a congregational approach. I quote: David Augsburg, "The Private Lives of Public Leaders," *Christianity Today* (November 1987), pp. 23-24; Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Counterpoint Press, 2000), p. 205; and John Paul Lederach, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Herald Press, 1999), p. 138.



**ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ**

*is Professor of Philosophy and Director of The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University.*

# The Heart of Reconciliation

A CONVERSATION WITH  
JOHN PAUL LEDERACH

For John Paul Lederach, building peace in conflict-torn situations—as a consultant and friend both to the highest government officials and to national opposition movements—has never been about playing it safe.

---

**H**is travel resumé reads like a list of destinations any cautious traveler would avoid: Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Spain after the death of dictator Francisco Franco, Nicaragua during civil war, Cambodia following tyrant Pol Pot, and Somalia. But for John Paul Lederach, the journey toward building peace in conflict-torn situations, as a consultant and friend both to the highest government officials and to national opposition movements, has never been about playing it safe. “Reconciliation is at the very heart of who we are called to be as the people of God,” he says. And Lederach follows the God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, who has never been One to play it safe.

A former director of the International Conciliation Service of the Mennonite Central Committee, Dr. Lederach is Distinguished Scholar at Eastern Mennonite University and teaches international peacebuilding at Notre Dame University. He founded EMU’s innovative Conflict Transformation Program in 1993. When we talked this summer, he was on break before final examinations in his Summer Peacebuilding Institute. Our conversation moved naturally from his current work, to his spiritual pilgrimage and the centrality of reconciliation to the Christian life.

**Bob Kruschwitz:** In addition to traveling around the world in mediation efforts, you bring people from many conflict-torn countries together in Harrisonburg, VA for the Summer Peacebuilding Institute.

John Paul Lederach: Yes, the SPI is a component of the Conflict Transformation Program that runs 15 shorter, intensive courses during

May and June. This summer 180 people are attending from about 55 countries. The vast majority work in non-governmental groups—relief and development, humanitarian aid, etc.—or in church organizations. They come together to study elicitive methods of conflict transformation.

**You have pioneered *elicitive* methods. How do they work?**

“Elicitive” is the notion of drawing from people’s understanding about the context of the conflict situations they’re involved in. For many years North American approaches to peace building dominated the conflict resolution field with a prescriptive modality: “You’ve got a problem—we’ve got a recipe for how you can handle it.” However, as you begin to work in different cultural settings, both with diverse communities in North America as well as internationally, one of the things that becomes quite apparent is the need not to rely on a transfer model that assumes a particular approach with its cultural biases would be relevant to every situation.

The eliciting model essentially says that how conflicts are responded to is significantly affected by the culture and context that they’re in. Designing appropriate response mechanisms will require you to have a capacity to draw from people’s understanding of their context and culture, as well as introducing new ideas. It parallels what’s referred to in Latin America as “popular education”; it is similar to Paulo Freire’s pedagogy that encourages a lot of participatory education, as opposed to one-way knowledge transfer from expert to student.

There are times when I’ve found the word being spelled with an “i” instead of an “e”—of course, that kind of creates a whole different meaning!

**This view, that social conflicts are deeply rooted in culture, reminds me of your story “The Colonel” in *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Herald Press, 1999). You write, “enemies are created” and “an enemy is rooted and constructed in our hearts and minds and takes on social significance as others share in the creation” (p. 47).**

In *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* I was reflecting on stories from my



**John Paul Lederach** travels the world to practice the good news that he teaches: “Our lives can be a journey toward reconciliation.”

own learning process. “The Colonel” is about how easy it was for me to engage in the creation of enemies around people that I didn’t even know personally—just by the very nature of who they were and how I positioned myself vis-à-vis them. In that particular case I saw myself in a superior position because I was a peace-making pacifist and here, across from me in the Honduran airport, was a soldier whom I would’ve seen as

---

**I was struck by my own capacity to create an enemy and how quickly and easily that’s done. Not only people who are evil do this; it’s something you find very close at home.**

---

being engaged in violence and warmongering, if you will. In less than an hour, without ever knowing this person personally, I suddenly discovered the humanity side of him—by watching him as a father greet his daughter who

was returning from the U.S. after treatment for a crippling disease that made her unable to walk. I was struck by my own capacity to create an enemy and how quickly and easily that’s done. It was, of course, counter to the very sense of values that I was purporting to believe in and trying to incarnate. “The Colonel” is about how enemies are created. Not only people who are evil do this; it’s something you find very close at home.

**You frequently tell stories in your books. Is there a story about your calling to your ministry in international mediation? Why did you get involved?**

There is not one sparking incident, so to say. I can track it by phases. An early phase for me would’ve been in my late teens when I became quite engaged personally with what we Mennonites call the “peace position”, which is our view of non-resistance and non-violence. That led me to stop my college at the sophomore year and go into a Mennonite Central Committee assignment.

I originally wanted to go to the Middle East but ended up in Brussels, Belgium in a student residence for 30 to 40 young men coming from Africa and Latin America. Every night we had long conversations about the nature of international conflict and change. That, in many ways, was my introduction to the whole process of dealing with cross-cultural and international conflict because I was living in a house full of folks who were from 20 different countries. When I came back I sought out a program at Bethel College that would permit me to get a major in the peace studies field—there were very few of those back in the late 1970’s.

Brussels was also the launch pad for the years that my wife, Wendy, and I spent in the Basque provinces of Spain, following the death of Francisco Franco who had been a 40-year dictator. We worked with the



conscientious objector and non-violent movement in Spain and in an emerging Mennonite community. In both groups I came to see more clearly the need to find ways to deal constructively with conflict among the people who purport to believe very much in peace. Just because we have a peace position doesn't mean we know how to deal with conflict! In *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* I reflect upon how we have had a very strong history in the Mennonite Church on the peace end of things, but we've not always had an equally strong theology of conflict—that is, how we can deal with it more constructively. It was in Spain that I began to explore how does one respond constructively to situations of conflict as they run all the way from interpersonal, small-group, and congregational levels to the international one.

So I track my sense of calling across three phases. (1) Early on it was theologically oriented. That differentiates me, and I think others from Eastern Mennonite University, from many others of the professional field who come at conflict studies much more exclusively from the social sciences. (2) I got very much engaged in the cross-cultural, international arena and that, of course, has remained the mainstay of my work over the last two decades. (3) I got pushed in the direction of how to think more pragmatically, not so much at a theoretical level. How do you actually *do* this? I tell my students that I'm more of a practitioner than I am an academician in the purest sense. I try to bring into the classroom some direct experiences of what it feels like to do this work on the ground, either internationally or in congregational community work.

### **Why is there so much conflict within the congregational free churches?**

I've worked across a lot of different denominations, including working at Notre Dame University with Catholic-related communities. My impression is that there's an equal amount of conflict in all of these places, so I'm not sure that it's more prevalent in free churches.

However, I do think that how we understand the organization and structure of church—our ecclesiology—has a significant impact on how we deal with conflict. In the free-church tradition there's a much keener sense of a priesthood of all believers—which is the idea that people have a capacity to go directly to the word, there can be personal revelation, and this personal side needs to mesh with the community's discernment. Consequently there is greater emphasis on the local and most meaningful community, being that of which you are a direct part, discerning what it is that God is leading it to do. This model suggests that we need a relatively high tolerance for ambiguity, as we're sorting things out together. I'm not sure that our churches have always taught us this capacity for ambiguity, but it's essential to the free-church tradition to engage in more of that.

Also we are quite serious about finding the ways to walk properly in the path of Jesus and where God is leading us. When people do take seriously their faith, there will be a natural level of conflict, given the nature of who we are as human beings, because things are not always exactly clear. It's precisely because you care deeply about something that conflict emerges; if you didn't care at all, you would have much less of it.

Sometimes we despair when we look at how conflict emerges around

---

**In congregational free churches we need a relatively high tolerance for ambiguity, as we're sorting things out together. I'm not sure that our churches have always taught us this capacity for ambiguity.**

---

things that seem potentially unimportant, like how we dress or what's the proper set of doctrines to follow on a minor issue, but I think it's really a positive sign that people seriously want to engage their faith and to do so within a meaningful community.

Where I find there is still a great deal that we could learn and more constructively do, is in handling this conflict more openly. Too often we drive disagreement underground, in order not to be seen as having too much disruption in the church. These conflicts then crop up in ways that are much less manageable and they often cause significant splits.

Not every community ought to stay together; in other words, I think there may be significant differences that require members to choose different paths. The question I would bring to bear is: "To what degree have we applied the discipline that we find in the teachings of Jesus?" Matthew 18 is a concrete example: have we seriously pursued what we hear God is saying to us, while at the same time being true to the discernment process within the community and a deep level of listening to other Christians? When we have engaged in that process, what we carry forward—even if we choose different pathways—is an understanding of who we are and what we're being called to by God, as opposed to the residue of bitterness that accompanies feeling like we have not been understood or that others have marginalized us in one form or another.

**In *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* you say, "I think the central dilemma that we face in the church is the tension between ambiguity and holiness" (p. 96). What do you mean by that?**

The core movement of God in history through Jesus Christ is incarnational, in which the Word became a living flesh to dwell among us. That movement is toward, not away from, the suffering and messiness of the world. What you find in *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* are some

stories where I struggle with the fact that when you follow Jesus into that messiness, you face situations of complexity where it's not always clear how to make the proper decision. It's much easier for me to remain in a small community of people who are exactly like I am and not have to be in conversation with a guerilla leader in Columbia. Or to be in the messiness of deciding whether to provide an educational program at the United States Army War College in Carlisle, PA, when my lifework has been dedicated to trying to change such military structures and make them no longer predominant in our country. Or to be in a situation like Somalia where all of the people that I work with are Muslim, so that I have to decide how to be true to who I am as a Christian, yet in a respectful relationship with those who are Muslim. Now in all of these circumstances, you face high levels of complexity and ambiguity; you are in relationships where it's not easy to discern the answers that might be found in a small group of people who are very much alike in their faith. But that for me is the fundamental notion of participating in God's incarnational mission: it's about developing relationships with people who are not like you.

So I understand the motto 'we are in but not of the world' (based on John 17:15-18) to mean *not* that we separate ourselves from the world in order to sustain our purity, but *rather* that we attempt to make present in the world the reconciling love of God.

**Traveling with the Conciliation Team during the Nicaraguan civil war, you reflected every day on Psalm 85. How do you understand the psalmist's vision?**

Reading Psalm 85 with a group of people who were attempting to end a war, I came to see the essence of the psalm to be the story of the people of Israel returning from exile to their homes and the psalmist weaving an appeal of what could be and what should be. In the translation that I was hearing in Spanish, verse 10 says essentially that "Truth and mercy have met together, justice and peace have kissed."

This psalm has become a powerful tool in my work because I developed a little exercise that I've been doing with groups, Christian and non-Christian, diplomats and grassroots—I've done it with virtually everyone you can imagine. It's extraordinary that Psalm 85:10 translates itself to all of these very, very different communities. The psalmist personifies truth, mercy, justice, and peace—as if each were a living voice, energy, or presence. In the exercise I invite a person or small group to identify with one of the voices, to ask, "What would truth say in our situation?" and so on. The voices meet in the psalm; so in the exercise I invite the persons to speak to one another the words of truth, mercy, justice, and peace.

You find very quickly, when you work with virtually any level of human conflict, from local family and interpersonal all the way to international, that it is precisely these four voices that are hard to hold together. It's not easy to connect the voice of mercy with the voice of truth. Truth is often focused on shedding light onto the past and bringing forward what has happened. In the context of conflict, the truth is oriented towards saying, "What actually did happen?" Whereas mercy is saying, "There has been failure, but we have to provide a new start." Mercy wants to permit relationships to move forward again, to find some way to bring redemption. So how one holds together at the same time an encounter between truth and mercy is one of the most difficult things that we face in working constructively with conflict. You can very easily find individuals or even whole communities within a conflict who fall on one side or the other of that divide. They become either more truth-oriented—they push for saying, "We've got to know"—or they push in the mercy-direction of "Can we not start again? Can we forgive?" The same is true with justice and peace. Justice says, "How are we going to make right what was wrong?" and "What changes will occur to prove that there has been a turning or conversion?" Justice requires that wrongdoing be accounted for. Peace, on the other hand, is about reconstituting the well-being of the community in the form of harmonious, proper relationships. Again, these two are not easy to hold together. In the context that I was hearing the Psalm day in and day out—in the deep violence that was happening in Nicaragua—it became so obvious that these were exactly the four things that we were trying to work on, but they were so hard to hold together. These paradoxes are at the heart of reconciliation in its deepest sense. Reconciliation is not about just saying the proper set of words and moving on, nor is it exclusively about going back and hammering on things that have happened, but it must combine these concerns.

**What would you say to people who are experiencing conflict in their local church or denomination, and to those who are very concerned about the world situation?**

I would go back to the most basic elements: (1) conflict poses the possibility of a tremendous opportunity and at the same time a tremendous risk; (2) reconciliation is at the very heart of who we are called to be as the people of God; and (3) it's a lifelong process. One of the misconceptions about reconciliation is that it's a once and over thing. The very nature of who we are as human beings created by God means that we are in this lifelong journey toward reconciliation that encompasses our families, schools, communities, and across our globe. If we're able to capture it as a sense of a longer mission, reconciliation is one of the most exciting things we can ever be involved in. It is a sacred process. It's church at its best. ☸

---

# Which Way to Forgiveness?

BY CAROLINE J. SIMON

How can we become people who forgive? Why would we want to be such people? Three recent books offer answers to these questions. One piece of wisdom that they all share is that forgiveness is a process that we cannot complete once and for all.

---

**G**eorge Appleton's *The Oxford Book of Common Prayer* contains one of the more remarkable prayers of which I am aware. It was written by an unknown prisoner in Ravensbruck concentration camp and left on the body of a dead child.

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering—our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this, and when they come to judgement let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness.

I am reminded of this prayer when I am feeling particularly estranged from someone, often for quite trivial reasons. How, I ask myself, could I grow into someone who could pray such a prayer—not just over petty affronts but also over matters of monstrous harm?

For Christians, one of our clearest directives is to forgive. Yet the scriptural tradition acknowledges that this will be one of our hardest mandates to fulfill. Luke records that when Jesus said to his disciples, "And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive," the disciples' immediate response was, "Increase our faith!" (Luke 17:4-5). How can we

become people who forgive? Why would we want to be such people? Three recent books offer answers to these questions.

Johann Christoph Arnold, in his book *Why Forgive?* (Plough Publishing House, 2000; 158 pp., \$10.00 paperback), answers his title question by emphasizing that forgiveness is a door to peace and happiness. This very readable book is full of stories of forgiveness and its good effects. Some of these stories are connected with famous contemporary incidents. The parents of Cassie, a student who was shot at Littleton High School, recount their decision to forgive the gunmen. The father of a young woman killed in the Oklahoma City government building bombing talks about why he sought out and expressed his compassion for the father of Timothy McVeigh. *Why Forgive?* also contains a few stories of unwillingness to forgive and its ill effects, illustrating the Chinese proverb alluded to in several places in the book: "Whoever opts for revenge should dig two graves." Other stories, including ones from Arnold's own life, deal with forgiveness for more mundane hurts—injuries within marriages, families, and work situations. Though all the stories told are brief, many of them are moving and inspiring. This book offers a wealth of illustrations about forgiveness; it may also be a source of motivation for some who are debating whether the hard work of forgiveness is worth their time and effort.

L. Gregory Jones, the author of *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995; 302 pp., \$22.00 paperback), while applauding Arnold's narrative approach, would be likely to find fault with Arnold's answer to the question "Why forgive?". Jones is extremely suspicious of what he calls "therapeutic forgiveness" because it locates the motivation to forgive in the benefits of forgiveness for the person who forgives. Jones calls this a "frighteningly shallow perspective" (p. 52). He seeks to replace this motive with a deep sense that our own forgiveness calls us to forgive others. "Most decisively, we are called to love enemies because that is what we have experienced as the enemies of God—love that is capable of transforming enemies into friends" (p. 263). This sense of ourselves as forgiven, thus forgiving, cannot be acquired quickly or in isolation. We need the life of the Church as a community of the forgiven and as the embodiment of God's Trinitarian presence to tutor us in the practices of forgiveness. We also need those who are more spiritually mature than we are to befriend us and apprentice us for the craft of forgiveness.

Jones' discussion is thorough and deep. *Embodying Forgiveness* can serve as an introduction to what many other theologians and philosophers have said on the subject of forgiveness, as Jones contrasts his views with theirs. One might at times wish that he treated other theologians with

somewhat more charity; his criticisms of Lewis Smedes, for example, may strike some people as unnecessarily harsh. Jones makes use of narratives, both fictional and biographical to provide embodiments for his conceptual analysis. He makes extensive use of the life, writings and death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a model of what the complex life of forgiveness looks like. However, Jones' discussion is at times highly theoretical and many readers unused to reading systematic theology will find the book heavy going. Those who successfully undertake the task of pondering his exposition will be rewarded with a fuller understanding of many important issues. Jones discusses where forgiveness fits among the Christian virtues, how Christian conceptions of forgiveness differ from other religious and secular conceptions of forgiveness, and how to avoid "cheap grace". He also deals with how forgiveness relates to the nature of God and the Church, as well as how forgiveness can inform our view of baptism, the Eucharist and other Christian practices. Moreover, Jones is not afraid to contend with such thorny issues as whether forgiveness can be irresponsible or otherwise inappropriate in some cases.

Jones emphasizes in his ambitious project that forgiveness is a process that unfolds over time. Patrick J. Brennan's *The Way of Forgiveness: How to Heal Life's Hurts and Restore Broken Relationships* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 2000; 216 pp., \$10.99 paperback), is a very practical book that leads the reader through steps toward forgiveness. Brennan deals with steps in repenting and seeking forgiveness. We cannot seek forgiveness until we can see ourselves

clearly enough to understand that we need it. Brennan thus encourages a practice of daily moral inventory, along with the cultivation of empathy for others and sincere prayer for the grace to repent. Brennan also deals with seeking to forgive. We need to face, understand and name our

hurts, decide to forgive, and reach out in hospitality to those who have hurt us. This can be a halting and lengthy process, which we may need to repeat or restart many times. Brennan also deals with hard cases like reconciliation with those who have died, and forgiving institutions and groups that have done harm. Each of the twenty-three chapters has an exposition of a central issue or concept, followed by scripture readings,

---

**The sense of ourselves as forgiven, thus forgiving, cannot be acquired quickly or in isolation. We need the life of the Church as a community of the forgiven and as the embodiment of God's Trinitarian presence to tutor us in the practices of forgiveness.**

---

reflection questions, and suggested prayers. *The Way of Forgiveness* is a book to be lived with, rather than one to be read through. Working one's way seriously through the book will provide insight into suppressed resentments, as well as ways to deal with present estrangements. It would thus be highly suitable as a set of spiritual exercises to use during a spiritual retreat or as a devotional guide to be used over an extended period.

Father Brennan is a Roman Catholic priest and his discussion is set within that tradition. References to the Penitential Rite of the Mass and the Sacrament of Reconciliation may seem foreign to Protestant readers. However, those from other Christian traditions will still find this a helpful book. It is full of wise counsel and human insight. In many ways, it is like having a portable spiritual director.

One piece of wisdom that *Why Forgive?*, *Embodying Forgiveness*, and *The Way of Forgiveness* all share is that forgiveness is a process that we cannot complete once and for all. Not only will new occasions of hurt, and thus for reconciliation, arise. We may also find to our surprise that some past hurt, with which we had thought we had dealt, is still not fully resolved. As Brennan puts it, "Hurt, sin, sorrow, and forgiveness are never behind us. The journey of forgiveness lies constantly before us . . . . [I]n the midst of praise and celebration we use past material for learning and growth and to move toward new life" (p. 133). As we work through the process of seeking and conferring forgiveness again and again, we will grow more fully into conformity with Christ. As the Church becomes more fully a community of reconciliation, we can more effectively bear witness to the God who forgives. As Jones exhorts us, "Let us be watchful for the ways in which we can embody the forgiving, transforming, and reconciling power of Easter in a world that all too often seems bent on finding ways to crucify" (p. 301). May God increase our faith and grant us the grace to live into forgiveness.

---



**CAROLINE J. SIMON**

*is Professor of Philosophy at Hope College in Holland, MI.*



---

# The Science of Forgiveness

BY KATHERYN RHOADS MEEK

The concept of forgiveness no longer falls solely under the umbrella of religious thought. Social scientists are beginning to recognize the powerful practical and therapeutic benefits that forgiveness offers in a broken and isolated world.

---

**F**orgiveness is a concept deeply rooted within a faith context. Indeed, in the Bible forgiveness is the most crucial concept, the basis for relational healing both horizontally (within community) and vertically (with God). Historically, the study of forgiveness fell under the purview of pastors and other religious leaders who have long known the powerful healing benefits that come with both giving and receiving forgiveness. Lives are transformed as hope takes the place of guilt, anger, loneliness, and fear, as relationships are restored, and the love of God transforms a life. However, all who struggle to grant forgiveness in the face of grave injustice recognize that forgiving is difficult. Consider the atrocities committed in the name of racial superiority, the daily abuse and murder of children around the world, the anger that cries for revenge and retribution in the face of great evil. Within these examples lie real people for whom the pain of injury is so grave that the hope offered through forgiveness appears as only a pipe dream. Yet religious leaders have consistently maintained that forgiveness is both required and provides the foundation for a new community of hope.

Since the late 1980's they have been joined by social scientists, with varying faith commitments, seeking to understand and implement the power of forgiveness in society at large. The Campaign for Forgiveness Research cites recent studies showing that the practice of forgiveness is directly related to emotional healing and the building of peaceful communities. The practical and therapeutic effects of forgiveness are far

ranging, and can be seen in various personal and social contexts: among Vietnam veterans coping with post-traumatic stress disorders; among victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence; among HIV/AIDS patients; and among the diverse clusters of people facing end-of-life issues. Given the link between health and forgiveness, is it any wonder that many people now think forgiveness can reduce the severity of heart disease, prolong the life of cancer patients, and reduce levels of crime (by quenching the desire for revenge)?

Everett Worthington brings together in *Dimensions of Forgiveness: Psychological Research & Theological Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 1998) diverse essays that draw out scientifically the links between the practice of forgiveness and personal and social health. His main purpose is to present “research into the scientific foundations of effective living—how positive mindsets and virtues enhance the lives of individuals and, ultimately, the well-being of society” (p. ix). The authors who were invited to contribute to the ten chapters represent many of the premier thinkers and researchers into the areas surrounding the religion and psychology of forgiveness. Worthington organizes the chapters around five major themes: forgiveness in religion, forgiveness in basic social processes, forgiveness in interventions, forgiveness in published research, and forgiveness in future research. I will attempt to draw attention to some of the relevant strengths of each chapter, specifically as they relate to practical applications in real world situations.

Though the first section of the book, “Forgiveness in Religion”, includes chapters entitled “The Ethos of Christian Forgiveness” and “The Elements of Forgiveness: A Jewish Approach”, the aim is not to ground the concept of forgiveness within a Judeo-Christian perspective. Martin Marty’s chapter entitled “The Ethos of Christian Forgiveness” clearly acknowledges that though “much of forgiveness history derives from Hebrew roots and Scriptures” the idea of forgiveness goes well beyond the borders of any particular religious confession. In fact he states that while the concept of forgiveness is “spread through many religions . . . it does not even demand a religious context in the first place.” This chapter is somewhat heady and at times difficult to get through, and those reading from an evangelical Christian perspective are likely to find themselves scratching their heads with some of his conclusions regarding the history (i.e., Biblical interpretation) and meaning of forgiveness. In contrast, Elliot Dorff’s chapter delineating a Jewish approach to forgiveness is both educational and readable. He provides a real world case example (of two groups of adolescent boys in conflict no less) from which he outlines specifically how the Jewish faith addresses all the elements of forgiveness, including issues of justice, vengeance, repentance, duty, reparation, and

reconciliation. He describes the process through which he attempted to lead these boys in forgiving their enemies. Dorff is particularly adept at addressing how God's intrinsic nature, comprised of both mercy and justice, co-exist and work together to promote God's ideal community.

The section titled "Forgiveness in Basic Social Processes" provides two chapters that contain insight into why people may choose forgiveness and alternatively why they may choose to remain victims. Kenneth Pargament and Mark Rye look at motivations for choosing to forgive others, primarily settling on the notion that people choose forgiveness as a means to cope with stress, injury, and pain. They make a convincing argument for understanding forgiveness within its religious context, citing empirical evidence that strongly supports this connection. They state, ". . . it may be very difficult to remove forgiveness from its spiritual context; in fact, the notion of a secular forgiveness . . . may be, for many people, an oxymoron" (p.69). These authors also challenge researchers to understand their own biases when attempting to understand a concept that for many people represents a religious value more than simply a coping mechanism designed to increase emotional well-being. In other words, they freely acknowledge the limitations of social scientists at grasping the full meaning of religious pursuits in their attempts to understand human behavior. In chapter four Roy Baumeister and his colleagues turn to the equally important topic of what might prevent people from choosing forgiveness. Among other issues they touch on is the appeal of remaining in the victim role and all the benefits which that stance may entail: personal advantages of pride and revenge, of not condoning the offense or setting oneself up for continued offenses, and of holding a grudge. They make a helpful distinction between the inner decision to choose forgiveness and the relational dimension of forgiveness if and when the victim chooses to relate to the perpetrator. Unfortunately, the authors of this chapter appear to make

---

**It may be very difficult to remove forgiveness from its spiritual context; in fact, the notion of a secular forgiveness may be, for many people, an oxymoron.**

---

forgiveness contingent upon the magnitude of the injury. Though they correctly acknowledge that forgiveness is a process that often takes a great deal of time, they also assert, "the magnitude and duration of the consequences should help determine forgiveness" (p. 94). While it is certainly true that the cost of forgiveness is in many cases perceived by people to be very high, which helps explain (as the authors note) why

many people are slow to forgive, it is always important to recognize that in most instances the perceived costs are based on a misunderstanding of what forgiveness means. Forgiveness does not guarantee reconciliation. It does not necessarily eliminate continued suffering or take away the consequences of another's act. Forgiveness is not condoning or excusing the offense, nor is it an acknowledgement of weakness. As the International Forgiveness Institute at the University of Wisconsin at

---

**Hopefully as more narratives are studied that stress the role of religious faith as the inspiration for forgiveness, the current research bias toward a secular, individualistic, and Eurocentric understanding of forgiveness may be overcome.**

---

Madison suggests, we should distinguish between forgiveness that refers to an individual's moral response to an injustice suffered, and reconciliation that refers to two or more parties coming together in mutual respect.

Section three of the book considers different models of promoting forgiveness with people who have been injured. Can something like "steps to forgiveness" be taught that will make the process of forgiveness a wider-spread practice? Researchers have suggested several steps, including some of the following moments: a careful examination of the situation, acknowledging and dealing with the fact that victims have been injured; making attempts to empathize with the offenders; an effort toward generating humility in victims as well as offenders, in considering their own transgressions and desire for forgiveness; and so on. Clearly, many models or programs could be devised that would assist us in becoming more forgiving. As Christians, however, we might ask whether or not these models spring from something more than a vague description of mental health, and if they finally lead to concrete forms of life that reflect God's own triune life of peace and love.

While the first two chapters in section three outline process models designed to teach people to forgive, there is a great deal of overlap in the models, and the chapters may be difficult to get through for those who are not trained as social scientists. I particularly recommend chapter seven, titled "Science and Forgiveness Interventions: Reflections and Recommendations". This chapter not only highlights the models presented in the previous two chapters in a succinct manner, it also is the first to directly resist the notion that forgiveness interventions can be blind to cultural differences. The authors challenge us to remember the danger of

attempting to scientifically study a complex and deeply personal cultural and religious phenomenon such as forgiveness. This is the age-old problem that is endemic to scientific research. Is a scientific lab similar to real world situations? Can people really lead others through a process of forgiveness sans cultural and religious elements, measure the results, and call the intervention successful for all people facing similar issues? While most ethical researchers would agree that this is not possible, the authors of this chapter do make the point that the majority of published work is based on a secular, individualistic, and Eurocentric understanding of forgiveness that makes generalizability difficult at best. Hopefully as more and more narratives are studied that stress the role of religious faith as the inspiration behind the practice of forgiveness, these research biases toward individualism and secularism may be overcome.

In section four of the book Michael McCullough, Julie Exline, and Roy Baumeister provide “An Annotated Bibliography of Research on Forgiveness and Related Topics”. This section summarizes and reviews, paper by paper, the published psychological literature on forgiveness and related concepts such as revenge, blame, apologies, and confession. While this section comprises a major portion of the book, it is an essential component for scientifically minded people who appreciate the interplay between theorizing about important concepts and testing them through empirical investigation.

I especially recommend the final chapter written by Lewis Smedes, who brings narratives of forgiveness to life. He effectively transmits to readers the hope inherent in making a lifelong commitment to pursue forgiveness. He does this by taking us on a journey from forgiveness to reconciliation with empathy, humility, and hope as our guides, without neglecting the uniqueness of situations in which forgiving is particularly difficult and reconciliation sometimes ill advised. In doing this he, more so than Martin Marty in the chapter “The Ethos of Christian Forgiveness”, connects the essence of forgiveness within a Christian perspective to the salvation offered by God.

This book can be an important resource on the scientific study of forgiveness. It provides some limited religious history, outlines where the field of psychology has been in studying forgiveness, and offers recommendations on how researchers ought to proceed. Some chapters will be more useful than others, to some degree depending on your specific purpose in reading about forgiveness.

If you want to learn more about the topic, visit the websites of the Templeton Foundation-funded “A Campaign for Forgiveness Research” ([www.forgiving.org](http://www.forgiving.org))—directed by Everett Worthington and endorsed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, President Jimmy Carter, and Harvard

psychologist Robert Coles—and the International Forgiveness Institute directed by Robert Enright ([www.intl-forgive-inst.org](http://www.intl-forgive-inst.org)). Another book to recommend is *Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice*, edited by Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament, and Carl E. Thoresen (New York: Guilford Publications, 1999. 334 pp.). These editors also invited leading researchers to write about the multiple dimensions of forgiveness research. The main strength of this book is the practical way the authors take a complex concept and apply it to specific situations (i.e., forgiveness in individual, marital, and pastoral care contexts) and cultural contexts (persons living with HIV/AIDS in India). This anthology, like Worthington's, makes it particularly clear that the concept of forgiveness no longer falls solely under the umbrella of religious thought. Social scientists are beginning to recognize the powerful practical and therapeutic benefits that forgiveness offers in a broken and isolated world.

---



**KATHERYN RHOADS MEEK**

*is Research and Consultation Coordinator with the Center for Church-Psychology Collaboration at Wheaton College in Wheaton, IL.*

# **AM/FM:** Audio-Magazine for Family Ministry

## **Leading the Way in Family Ministry**

Featuring models of innovative ministry and exciting, challenging ideas for leading family ministry in your congregation, AM/FM is a must for every church leader (*clergy or laity*) engaging their congregation in real-life family ministry.

Each 40-plus minute issue includes interviews with authors, ministry professionals and church leaders who are leading the way in family ministry. Additionally, issues include book reviews, humorous anecdotes, and much, more.

AM/FM is produced on audiocassette and mailed each quarter; annual subscription cost is only \$20 — or \$6 more for the new CD version!

**Want to find out more?** Call today to receive a complimentary issue of AM/FM and visit our website @ [cfcm.baylor.edu](http://cfcm.baylor.edu).

**To subscribe,** pick-up the phone now and call toll-free 1 877 710-1159 or complete the requested subscriber information @ [cfcm.baylor.edu](http://cfcm.baylor.edu).

*AM/FM: Audio-Magazine for Family Ministry is produced by the Center for Family and Community Ministries at Baylor University. For more information about the Center, contact Dr. Diana R. Cantani, Baylor University, P.O. Box 97120, Waco, Texas 76798-7120; call (254) 710-1199; or email [Diana\\_Cantani@baylor.edu](mailto:Diana_Cantani@baylor.edu).*

# List of Contributors

**DOROTHY C. BASS**

Director of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith

**C. DAVID BOLIN**

Minister of Music, First Baptist Church, Waco, TX

**BRIAN L. HARBOUR**

Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church, Richardson, TX

**HEIDI J. HORNİK**

Associate Professor of Art History, Baylor University

**ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ**

Director of the Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University

**JOHN PAUL LEDERACH**

Research Lecturer in International Peacebuilding, Notre Dame University and  
Distinguished Scholar, Eastern Mennonite University

**THOMAS G. LONG**

Bandy Professor of Preaching, Candler School of Theology, Emory University

**KATHERYN RHOADS MEEK**

Research and Consultation Coordinator,  
Center for Church-Psychology Collaboration, Wheaton College

**DAVID G. MILLER**

Associate Professor of English, Mississippi College

**FREDERICK A. NIEDNER, JR.**

Professor of Theology, Valparaiso University

**J. RANDALL O'BRIEN**

Assistant to the President and Professor of Religion, Baylor University

**ROBERT C. ROBERTS**

Distinguished Professor of Ethics, Baylor University

**CAROLINE J. SIMON**

Professor of Philosophy, Hope College

**DOROTHY JEAN WEAVER**

Professor of New Testament, Eastern Mennonite Seminary

**RALPH C. WOOD**

University Professor of Theology and Literature, Baylor University

**TERRY W. YORK**

Associate Professor of Christian Ministry and Church Music, Baylor University