

North Park Theological Seminary

**Wrestling with the Nature and Demand
of Christian Interpersonal Forgiveness**

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Theological Topic: Forgiveness
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Richard P. Lord, in a "Personal Perspective" article in the October 9, 1991 issue of The Christian Century, described a poignant question brought to him by one of his parishioners: I was asked by Betty Jane Spencer, "Preacher, do I have to forgive a man who murdered my four sons?"

A few years earlier, a group of young men had gotten high on drugs and broken into her Indiana farmhouse and committed mass murder. Betty Jane's sons were killed. She was shot and left for dead. Since beginning his prison sentence, one of the convicted criminals wrote to tell her he had "found Christ" and asked for her forgiveness.

When she said "Preacher," I knew she wanted more than my opinion. She wanted a statement that represented the Christian tradition. "Am I obligated as a Christian to forgive in this situation? Just what does the church mean by 'forgiveness'?" He did not say 'I'm sorry' ... just 'Forgive me,'" she continued. "What am I to do?" (Lord, p.902) Lord responds to Betty Jane by asking for six months to consider his answer. He embarks on a time of investigation and reflection during which he interviews and reads accounts of crime and Holocaust victims, studies Jewish tradition, and recalls words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Six months later, he answers Betty's question: "No."

Betty Jane's situation is very real and painful, but it is not unique. A pastor may not be dealing frequently with the aftermath of murder, but other traumatic events are everywhere, touching nearly everyone -- perhaps hidden in a parishioner's history, perhaps as commonly-known as the last church split. Since forgiveness is a theological issue, it is not surprising that Betty Jane sought counsel from her pastor. Many Christians, while yet in the depths of pain from some tragic event, sincerely want to know what is the godly course of action -- even if they may find it hard to do.

As a co-psychotherapist and lay pastor who has seen and read much about the clinical benefits of forgiving, I am saddened by Lord's response. I know of numerous cases of injured persons, who after work and prayer, were able to forgive even unrepentant, absent, or dead offenders. These courageous forgivers reported benefits such as peace of mind, elimination of previous preoccupation with their injury, less trouble with anger both towards the offender and towards other persons in their lives, lower anxiety, greater self-esteem, better general health and even weight loss (Lehman; Stringham p.18-21; Dudley). In addition to many anecdotal reports are empirical research findings. Freedman and Enright (Freedman and Enright) found that an experimental group of female incest survivors who worked on forgiving their abusers gained more in hope and decreased more in anxiety and depression than did a control group who did not work on forgiveness. Al-Mabuk, Enright & Cardis (Al-Mabuk, et.al.) found that an experimental group of parentally love-deprived late adolescents who worked on forgiving their parents gained more in hope and self-esteem than did the control group who did not complete the program on forgiving. Was there benefit that Betty Jane Spencer could have enjoyed had Lord interpreted "the Christian tradition" to her differently?

A closer look at the path Lord took to his conclusion highlights two crucial decision points at which I believe he veered the wrong direction. The first decision is that of defining forgiveness. The second is in interpreting Scripture. By examining Lord's decisions in these two areas, this paper will argue that the Christian's answer to Betty Jane's question should ultimately be "yes."

The Definition of Forgiveness

There is little point in arguing over whether or not to forgive if those arguing have not agreed on what forgiveness means. In order to understand Richard Lord's answer to Betty Jane Spencer, it is essential to know his definition of forgiveness. Unfortunately, Lord never gives a definition as such of forgiveness. He does however, make a number of revealing statements

from which one can infer something of his working definition. In this section, I will attempt to derive Lord's definition of forgiveness from his article, review various options of definitions from other sources, and then propose the use of one particular definition.

Richard Lord's definition. The first characteristics possibly defining forgiveness mentioned by Lord are forgetting and excusing. Lord interviewed a woman (not Betty Jane) whose son had been murdered, who was worried about whether forgiving the murderers meant she would have to forget her son. Lord does not say that forgiveness *should* be taken to mean forgetting, but he emphasizes that victims may see it that way. He underscores the association of forgiving with a kind of denial of reality when he says: "When we forgive someone, it usually implies that we will try to act as though nothing has happened" (Lord, p902). On the other hand, Lord rejects a definition of forgiveness as excusing. In Betty Jane's situation, excusing might mean that the murderer should not be punished for what he did.

Another aspect of Lord's definition of forgiveness evidenced in his writing is that it is bi-lateral -- requiring more than one person. His assumption seems to be, that since the injurious situation involved two (or more) parties, the victim and the offender, forgiveness must also take two -- the forgiver and the "repent-er." Lord says: "Forgiveness is not a commodity that can be handed out. It is a relationship that must be entered into" (Lord, p.902). Along the same line, Lord includes reconciliation within the definition of forgiveness:

Those of us who speak on behalf of the Christian community can speak of God's mercy to the truly repentant, but we have no right to insist that the victim establish a relationship with his or her victimizer to effect a reconciliation. (Lord p.902)

I am *not* arguing at this point that victims *should* be pressured into relationships with offenders; I am merely attempting to show that Lord believes saying a victim should forgive is equivalent to saying he or she must fully reconcile with the offender(s).

Since Lord conceives of forgiveness as a bi-lateral transaction, he also includes the offender's demonstration of repentance as an essential pre-requisite (see also Wilson p.535). Furthermore, the guilty one must repent to the one offended directly. This condition of repentance becomes one of the tests of true forgiveness. In support of his position, Lord cites the Jewish tradition of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Regarding interpersonal forgiveness, Lord states that "Not even God forgives what you have done to another" (Lord p.902). In other words, there is no forgiveness -- not even from God -- if not received directly from the one offended in response to repentance. He goes on to stress the logic of this idea by describing the dilemma of Holocaust victim Simon Wiesenthal. A dying German soldier confesses his part in the murders of many Jews to Wiesenthal and asks for his forgiveness. Wiesenthal leaves the soldier, unable to forgive him, imagining "meeting dead Jews in heaven and hearing them ask, 'Who gave you the right to forgive our murderer?'" (Lord, p902). This concern has so impacted Mr. Lord that he says "I no longer say in a general or public way, 'Your sins are forgiven,'" because he imagines a battered wife in his congregation thinking "'Who gave you the right to forgive the one who beats me?'"

Since, from the report of the prison psychologist, there was significant doubt about whether the murderer of Betty's sons had actually repented, Lord clearly believes that Betty Jane should not forgive him. "To offer forgiveness when these conditions [true repentance] are not met is not gracious. It is sacrilegious" (Lord p.902). However, he does not make clear what could be done if the murderer did give ample evidence of repentance. If his line of thinking accurately describes how forgiveness works, then the only ones, in heaven or on earth, who can forgive the murder of Betty Jane's sons are the dead sons themselves -- not Betty Jane. Even if one allows for the closest living relative to take their place, then Betty Jane could be authorized

to forgive. Yet Lord says: “Don’t ask [Betty Jane] to go to them and judge their hearts. Let a representative of the church assume that burden” (Lord p.903). What then does Lord leave the representative of the church able to do for the offenders? Say “Yes, it appears that you have truly repented, but I’m sorry that you can never be forgiven because those you sinned against are dead or unwilling to forgive -- and God won’t forgive you unless they do”? At worst, Lord is putting the offender’s eternal destinies under Betty Jane’s control. He says: “...don’t ask her to be responsible for their [the offenders’] salvation.” (Lord, p.903). At best, he is inconsistent in how he defines forgiveness -- on the one hand saying a representative of the church should weigh the genuineness of the offender’s repentance, and on the other hand, saying they have no right to pronounce forgiveness.

If forgiveness, then, according to Lord, means 1) forgetting an offense occurred, 2) entering into a close relationship with the offender, repentant or not, and 3) taking responsibility for the offender’s salvation, then it is no wonder that he told Betty Jane that she did not have to do it. His pastoral sensitivity would not allow him to tell Betty Jane that she had to 1) forget her sons’ deaths, 2) become friends with convicted murderers who may not be truly sorry for what they’ve done, and 3) assume personal responsibility for their eternal destinies. In that churches that are made up of people from the dominant culture do not tend to be sensitive to the perspective of victims, Lord’s concerns to understand the victim’s perspective are especially needed. I do not believe, however, that his conclusions adequately represent God’s message of healing to the oppressed.

Other Definitions. Rightly or wrongly, in practice, people attribute a fairly broad range of meanings to forgiveness, and Lord’s attributions are not unique. The part of Judaic tradition which Lord cites, however, while not erroneous, is certainly incomplete, and therefore misleading. Louis Newman finds in the traditional sources both the duty to repent and seek forgiveness from those one has sinned against, *and* the duty to forgive. That it is important to the offender’s relationship with God as well as to people to truly repent of his or her sins is not in question. Presuming God’s omniscience, if a person were to seek forgiveness from God as a way of *avoiding* acknowledging his or her sin against another person, then the petitioner would be rebuffed or at least redirected -- because God is not mocked. However, the duty to forgive derives not from the offender’s deserving, but from the forgiver’s imitation of God:

the Judaic tradition...provides a conception of the deity which serves as the model for human perfection. Thus, the belief in a God who is compassionate and forgiving will have direct consequences for one’s obligations toward others. This is especially apparent in the case of the duty to forgive, since within the Jewish tradition, forgiveness is regarded as one of God’s most essential attributes. (Newman p.169.)¹

In regards to the requiring the offender’s repentance as a condition for granting forgiveness, it is significant to note that Newman also cites one classical rabbinic source which is unique. This source advocates the unconditional granting of forgiveness -- mercy even when the offender has not sought it (Newman p.171). Newman says that while this belief is *not* representative of the overwhelming majority of sources, it must be acknowledged that an offended person *may choose* to forgive unconditionally (my emphasis). This allowing of mercy beyond the call of duty is contrary to Lord’s labeling such as “sacrilegious.”

The literature of psychotherapy, especially as it intersects with Christianity, also yields

¹See also Gladson p.134, who concludes that an anthropology which “respects humanity as the *imago dei*” also includes humanity’s entitlement to forgiveness from God, and responsibility to extend forgiveness to others.

various definitions for forgiveness (Veenstra p.160). Some definitions, similar to forgetting and excusing, seem to be trying to eliminate the fact of the offense after it has happened. I would call this the “denial” category of definitions, in which the following would be considered synonymous with forgiving: minimizing, condoning, and ignoring/overlooking. These definitions all in some way try to reframe the offense as less offensive, or not offensive at all. Understandably, victims who are confronted, either within themselves or by others, with these understandings of forgiveness, will feel invalidated. Whatever pain, grief, anger or other difficult emotions they feel are essentially being called inappropriate or exaggerated or unnecessary, since, in theory, they could “forgive” and the original offense would “magically” disappear.

Another category of definitions recognizes that forgiveness is irrelevant unless there has been an offense, but assumes that forgiveness is complete when the victim no longer seeks to resolve the conflict with the offender in any way. Synonyms for forgiveness in this, the “distancing” category, would include: withdrawing, writing-off, and pardoning/releasing. This group of definitions has the advantage of acknowledging a crime, so that victims are less likely to feel re-victimized by denial of their pain. However, it is doubtful that these definitions go far enough. Withdrawing or writing-off assume an end or at least a deterioration to the relationship between the offended and offender. This definition does not fit the picture Jesus gives in Luke 17 of forgiving one’s brother or sister seven times in a day. Since people regularly hurt those to whom they are close, at least in small ways, and apply forgiveness to overcome the injuries, then there must be a way to forgive without simply “writing off.” Jesus praying from the cross “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34)² also illustrates the inadequacy of these definitions, because Jesus’ death and resurrection made possible a *reconnection* rather than a severing of humanity’s relationship with God. Pardoning/releasing may allow for the continuing of the relationship between offender and offended, but such legal language does not reveal the heart of the offended one, nor does it allow for holding an offender accountable, or appropriately protecting society from a criminal offender.

A Proposed Definition. I would propose the following definition of forgiveness developed by researcher Robert Enright and the Human Development Study Group, who themselves credit the influence of philosopher J. North:

Forgiveness is the overcoming of negative affect and judgment toward the offender, not by denying ourselves the right to such affect and judgement, but by endeavoring to view the offender with compassion, benevolence, and love while recognizing that he or she has abandoned the right to them. (Enright 1991 p.126)

This definition has many advantages over the others I have encountered. Unlike those in the denial category, this definition presupposes that a wrong has been committed. The offended one has a right to feel anger, hurt, judgment, toward the offender. However, despite the fact that the offender has “abandoned the right” to “compassion, benevolence, and love,” the offended one can choose to extend them in the gift of forgiveness. Unlike those in the distancing category, this definition allows as close a relationship with the offender as the offender’s behavior makes possible. This definition is also consistent with the Biblical concept of imitating God’s readiness to love and welcome sinners: “while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). (The Biblical treatment of forgiveness will be discussed further in the next section.)

Furthermore, it is important to note that forgiveness as defined here is the action of *one*

²All Scripture references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

person -- the injured party. The significance of this uni-lateral character of forgiveness is that an injured person is not controlled by the offender regarding the decision to forgive (Benson p.77). If the offender is dead, unreachable, uninterested in communication, or unrepentant, the injured one can still, by God's grace, and with the loving support of the Christian community, work through a process of giving the gift of forgiveness. The offended Christian can only be held responsible for his or her own actions and attitudes -- and regardless of the offender's attitude and behavior, the offended one can forgive -- and receive the benefits of forgiving in his or her own life. This definition clearly distinguishes forgiveness from reconciliation, which would, of necessity, require the participation of the offender. Enright makes the following helpful distinction:

Reconciliation ... is a behavioral coming together, in that both parties agree to a new relationship; one party or both parties may have to consciously and deliberately change ways. Repentance, or a true change of heart in the other, should be a requirement for reconciliation if the injustice is not to be perpetuated in the future. This distinction would free a client to release painful, negative emotions, experience love toward an offender [i.e., forgive], but then conditionally and willingly await reconciliation. (Enright 1990 p.18)

The Interpretation of Scripture

The second major area in which I believe Richard Lord veered in the wrong direction in answering Betty Jane's question is in the interpretation of Scripture. Lord chooses in his article simply not to engage Scripture at all in any direct way. Perhaps if Lord's arguments and oblique references were clearly consistent with Scripture, then to cite chapter and verse would have been redundant. A look at what Scripture says about forgiveness, however, raises serious questions about the integrity of Lord's claim to be representing "the Christian tradition" about forgiveness.

Many people, Christians and non-Christians alike, have the impression that God instructs his followers to forgive people who hurt them. This impression is not surprising considering the large amount of Scripture devoted to or at least applicable to the concept. Beginning in the Old Testament, God taught the Israelites to behave charitably towards their enemies. In very practical terms, regardless of how one might feel toward the person, the law instructs the Israelite:

When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free" (Exod 23:4-5)

And

If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink (Prov 25:21)

The Book of Proverbs also gives warnings not to gloat over anyone else's disaster, whether it is of the poor (Prov 17:5) or of one's enemies (Prov 24:17).

Jesus carries the relationship of God's followers to their enemies even further -- far from simply not rejoicing at an enemy's misfortune, the disciple must *love* his or her enemy:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not

even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matt 5:43-48)

Note that Jesus commands people to love their enemies not because it is *fair* to do so, but so that they “may be children of [their] Father in heaven.” Loving enemies grows out of *who we are* and *whose we are* as Christians, rather than out of who our enemies are or what they do or do not deserve. The same idea is paralleled in Luke 6:35 as well.

The Apostle Paul is consistent with the tradition of blessing enemies, and adds the reminder that only God is authorized to carry out retribution for evil:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. (Rom 12:14)

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:17-21)

The Apostle Peter says much the same thing:

Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called--that you might inherit a blessing. (1 Pet 3:9)

In addition to the overarching ethic of love -- even for one's enemies -- the Bible is full of exhortations to forgiveness specifically. This is not to say that love and forgiveness are the same, but that forgiving those who have become our enemies by their treatment of us can be seen as a concrete manifestation of loving them (Gladson p.132). In many cases, the Biblical authors make a connection between the receiving of forgiveness from God and the extending of forgiveness to persons. In the Lord's Prayer as recorded in Matthew 6, Jesus teaches the disciples to pray "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Mtw 6:12). Jesus removes any ambiguity from the nature of the connection between receiving and extending forgiveness by adding: "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." (Mtw 6:14-15) Also in Matthew's Gospel is the parable of the unforgiving servant, who was forgiven of a huge debt he could not pay, but who did not forgive a fellow-servant of a small debt. Jesus sums up the parable in much the same way as he clarified the Lord's Prayer:

"Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart. (Mtw 18:33-35)

The same connection is also made by Jesus in Mark 11:25 and Luke 6:36-37, and by Paul in Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13. In every case except one, which will be addressed below, the commands to forgive address only the duty of the forgiver, not the one needing forgiveness. Therefore, we cannot draw any conclusions about what is the responsibility of the offender -- the text is not addressing that issue. The texts give the picture of an unconditional gift of forgiveness.

Given the nearly overwhelming amount of Scripture which exhorts believers to forgive and even to love and pray for their enemies, one may wonder what ambiguity exists regarding how to answer the question of whether a Christian should forgive an offender, repentant or not. There seem to be three main avenues of thought here. The first is simply not to engage Scripture in answering the question, as Lord has chosen. The only reference to the Bible he makes is a

passing mention of “fruits of repentance,” presumably alluding to John the Baptist’s confrontation of the Scribes and Pharisees who approached him for baptism (see Matthew 3:8 and Luke 3:8). If, as seems to be the case with Lord’s investigation, one does not consider the majority of Biblical texts explicitly referring to forgiveness, or one focuses only on the offender’s need to repent, then the answer remains unclear.

A second possible approach to the interpretation of Scripture on this question depends on one’s interpretation of Luke 17:3-4:

[Jesus said to the disciples] Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. 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.

In this one text, there is mention of the offender’s repentance connected to the interpersonal forgiveness which is commanded. The question becomes whether Jesus means to say here, “if *and only if* the disciple repents, you must forgive him.” Some Christians argue that repentance is here given as a pre-requisite for the victim’s action of forgiveness. The priority of the text, however, is the command to forgive. Rather than making a point about the reasons one should withhold forgiveness, the text emphasizes that disciples must live in a state of readiness to forgive -- even if another disciple sins against one seven times in one day -- that is, no matter how many times it happens. In other words, the burden of the command is on the readiness of the one sinned against to forgive, rather than on the discerning of adequate repentance on the part of the other (Hagner p.839).

The immediate context of the passage may put the emphasis on preventing or overcoming the negative effects of sin. Jesus says in verses 1 and 2, something like “A terrible fate awaits the one who causes these little ones to sin! Don’t be that person!” While it seems doubtful that the reference to “these little ones” in verse 2 would apply to the disciples themselves, verses 3 and 4 could still be connected in thought to 1 and 2 by seeing them as further comments on the seriousness of sin. Jesus could be saying, “This is how to ‘contain’ the ‘toxic’ sin in among you -- watch out, and don’t simply let sins go by unnoticed -- but follow the interactive procedure of rebuke, repent, and forgive.”

It is significant to note that Jesus is speaking in this passage to *his disciples* (v1) about what to do when there is sin committed *amongst themselves* (lit. your brother, ὁ ἀδελφός σου, is the one who sins here). He is not speaking of how they should respond to *enemy* attack. He is not counseling his followers to expect to use the interactive rebuke-repent-forgive paradigm with hostile outsiders, but with those who are close to them -- close enough to sin against them seven times in a day. Is Jesus then saying that in the case of people in one’s “inner circle” that forgiveness should be conditional on prior repentance? Texts such as Mark 11:25 which make sweepingly inclusive mandates to forgive seem to say no: “forgive, if you have *anything* against *anyone*” (italics mine).

Perhaps the difference lies not in the ultimate obligation to forgive, but in the pastorally wise way of caring for the specific relationship in question. If my husband (someone in my “inner circle”) sins against me and I immediately jump to forgiving without bringing the sin to his attention (the “rebuke”) and giving him a chance to respond with repentance, then the intimacy of our relationship will erode. I may, actually, in such a circumstance have not forgiven him at all; rather I may have simply withdrawn, desired consciously or unconsciously to avoid conflict, or convinced myself that no sin was committed or that it was too trivial to mention. Following Jesus’ admonition in close relationships helps to maintain the trust, communication, and mutual respect needed to keep them healthy and intimate. Should a brother

or sister in the Lord *not* repent of a sin when it is brought to his or her attention, then other church discipline procedures would be applied. After the pattern of Matthew 18:15ff, the one sinned against would bring the offense to successively larger circles of accountability. Significantly, the last discernment is a decision of the community, not of the offended individual alone. If the body determines that the individual has indeed sinned and is unrepentant, then he or she becomes to the church “as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Mtw 18:17). The relationship has now changed from “inner circle” to “enemy,” and the admonitions about loving and praying for enemies would be applied. Ultimately, the point is not removing the obligation to forgive, but preserving as close a relationship as possible. Jesus’ words to the disciples seem to presume that they will sin against each other, and that they should expect to be rebuking one another, repenting before one another, and forgiving one another on an everyday basis.

The larger context of this passage is a diverse collection of teachings from Jesus’ ministry in and around Perea, before he goes to Jerusalem. A few chapters earlier is the parable of the Prodigal son, in which a sinful, rebellious son, in a state of dubious repentance returns to his father’s house. The father, however, does not wait to measure the depths of his son’s repentance before having compassion on him, and demonstrating with tremendous humility his stance of love and welcome toward the son -- he runs out to meet the son, having seen him from afar, and embraces him (Luke 15:20). The parable illustrates God’s stance of love and readiness to welcome sinners to himself. Given the many connections made between God’s forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of other people (in Luke particularly, see 6:36-37) perhaps the Gospel writer intended to show God’s loving readiness to welcome sinners home as a model for the disciples’ attitudes towards one another.

Finally, I have also encountered a third approach to the interpretation of Scripture about interpersonal forgiveness. In this approach, the texts advocating forgiveness and love of enemies will be acknowledged, but will be subordinated to the issue of justice. How will forgiving the offender promote justice? W.R. Domeris, writing in the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, seems to acknowledge a Christian mandate to forgive when he describes “Two Dynamics in Operation”:

On the one hand there is the oppressor who needs to be rebuked (following Luke 17:3) so that he/she repents and is then forgiven. On the other hand is the oppressed Christian, who following the example of Jesus, needs to be gracious and forgiving even at the moment of deepest suffering. (Domeris p.50)

However, Domeris goes on to endorse the following statement from *The Kairos Document*, which makes forgiveness conditional upon repentance:

in practice no reconciliation, no forgiveness and no negotiation are possible without repentance. The Biblical teaching on reconciliation and forgiveness makes it quite clear that nobody can be forgiven and reconciled with God unless he or she repents of their sins. Nor are we expected to forgive [sic] the unrepentant sinner.³(Domeris p.48)

Domeris acknowledges his inconsistency, saying that the above statement loses “something of the full spectrum of the Biblical teaching” (Domeris p.50), but justifies it because he believes the “Church in South Africa has usually erred in the opposite direction” and needs to be balanced (Domeris p.50). Thus Domeris relativizes the mandate to forgive in an attempt to better promote justice in the specific situation of conflict in South Africa. Lord’s conclusions may have been influenced by this kind of “balancing” motive as well. He mentions that the victims who spoke

³*The Kairos Document* was published in the Journal of Theology for Southern Africa, 12/85, No.53.

with him about the issue of forgiveness were “very disturbed,” because “[t]hey were constantly being told they must forgive, but most could not” (Lord p.902). While the desire to correct the church’s errors of the past in not understanding and caring for victims is laudable, I have reservations about consciously changing Scriptural mandates to do so.

The Kairos Document, and Richard Lord as well, draw the conclusion that since *God* only forgives people when they repent, *Christians* should only forgive people when they repent. Lord references Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s condemnation of “cheap grace” which is the “preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.” He argues that forgiveness should not be considered unless the three-fold progression of “remorse, restitution and regeneration” give evidence of true repentance. As previously mentioned, he even goes so far as to say that forgiveness offered when such conditions are not met is “... not gracious. It is sacrilegious” (Lord p.902). At first these arguments seem compelling. After all, expecting no change or even sincere intention and effort to change in a person’s life before pronouncing God’s forgiveness leads to an empty discipleship.

The problem with the above arguments, however, is that they put the victim in the position of God with respect to the offender. As previously discussed, this is consistent with Lord’s definition of forgiveness, which required that Betty Jane take on responsibility for the murderer’s salvation in her choice of whether or not to forgive. The Biblical commands to individuals to forgive, however, do not state that doing so will ensure the offender’s salvation. God does not say that an offended person should provide a means of atonement for the offender’s sin, and pronounce absolution over them toward God. God has already made provision for the forgiveness of sin. While as an individual we do not speak for God, we do speak for ourselves. God asks us to forgive not because the offender deserves it, not because it is fair to do so, and not because the offender has repented. In fact, the grounds for God’s mandate of forgiveness has nothing to do with the offender at all. It is a response of love and gratitude and humility on the part of one who has presumed to *accept forgiveness* from God’s hand. God will take care of the justice of an offender’s eternal destiny. The offender does not earn or pay for the forgiveness which a human victim gives as a gift. We “charge it to God’s account”⁴.

Conclusion: Concern for the Healing of the Injured Person

In the case of small offenses, such as an insensitive remark by a spouse, or a friend’s forgetting a date, individuals may not feel the need to probe deeply into the meaning of the Biblical mandate to forgive. We consciously or unconsciously employ various strategies for getting over the hurt we feel, and are able to let go of the offense. If the same injury does not happen over and over again, then we are likely to be able to resume the relationship with the person who hurt us in much the same manner as before the offense occurred. We may not be able to define forgiveness precisely, but we intuitively feel that we have forgiven, and we are at peace.

In the case of larger or chronic offenses, however, the question of forgiveness becomes more difficult. Rather than being an everyday interaction, forgiveness may loom intimidatingly before the injured party. Suddenly forgiveness cannot be contemplated without asking what is its relationship to God’s condemnation of evil, and to God’s heart for justice for the oppressed, and care for “the least of these” (Mtw 25:40). For a pastor seeking to minister to an injured parishioner, the issues are many. Those with a high regard for Scripture will be concerned about

⁴This expression is one used by Pastor Virgil Vogt of Reba Place Church, Evanston, Illinois .

understanding and communicating accurately God's word to the situation. At the same time, the pastor must remember that he or she is dealing primarily with a person, not a theological exercise -- and questions of timing, the context of the person's life, the nature and degree of the injury, and the possibility or necessity of involving other care-giving professionals, all will influence what steps should be taken.

As a pastor considers how to make the church a healing place for both victims and offenders, he or she would do well to assume that the congregation needs deliberate forgiveness education. As was stated earlier, given how he defined forgiveness, it is just as well that Richard Lord did not tell Betty Jane Spencer that "the Christian tradition" required her to do it. However, proactively teaching a Biblically consistent definition of forgiveness such as was proposed earlier could help to facilitate the process of difficult forgiveness should such an occasion arise. Clarifying what *is* presumed in forgiveness, e.g., that a sin has been committed, and what is *not* presumed, e.g., that the offender should not be held accountable, should help to alleviate fears. Repentance and reconciliation should be included in the discussion of forgiveness, to clarify and distinguish the concepts one from another. I typically view the three concepts as related in a kind of equation: forgiveness + repentance = the "conception" of reconciliation. The pastor can also model the acceptance of victims' justified feelings of anger, grief, and judgment toward their offenders, rather than trying to minimize the significance of their injuries out of the pastor's own discomfort with conflict or negative emotions. By recognizing that forgiveness in the case of severe injuries will take time and effort and healing on the part of the victim (Benson p.78), the pastor can help to make the church a safer place for victims on their journey.

Gayle Gerber Koontz, in her article "As We Forgive Others: Christian Forgiveness and Feminist Pain" makes several suggestions for "a theology of forgiveness and reconciliation which has integrity in relation to victims" (Koontz p.177ff): 1) Do not allow a separation of love of God and love of neighbor, as if one can do the former without doing the latter. 2) Preach and teach on God's grace in healing from *shame* as well as sin (my emphasis). 3) Consider the psychological and spiritual healing process of the injured ones, in issues such as empowering the victims, and in forgiving *for the sake of the victim* (my emphasis). Following guidelines such as these will probably not be sufficient by themselves to facilitate the healing journey through forgiveness for victims in one's congregation, but it could help to make the grace of God more accessible.

The love taught in Biblical Christianity is radical indeed. Forgiving the perpetrator of a serious crime against us is humanly irrational, and seemingly impossible. While churches need to become understanding and welcoming places for those who have suffered grievous traumas, I hope that we will not throw the proverbial "baby out with the bath water." As we communicate the message that in Christ we are God's children, heirs of the Kingdom, with resources that are far beyond our human limitations, we can empower injured members of the congregation. In committing to learn to forgive those who hurt us, out of gratitude for God's unfathomable grace to us, we are His hands and feet, carrying out His loving work in the world. And we can rest in the reassurance that we can never out-give God.

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