

Should Christians Forgive Always; Does God Always Forgive?

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Abstract: Christianity brings a substantial development in the concept of forgiveness when, by commanding to forgive even the enemy, it lessens the distance between divine and human forgiveness. But, while forgiving those who intentionally attempt to harm or destroy us or others, do we not condone or justify injustice; and as a result, do we not undermine our personal and the common safety and betterment? Can the State still punish the perpetrator if the victim forgives? This article discusses resentment, sin and crime, and forgiving as “letting go”, “love given before” and “absolution”. It also explores the significant difference between divine and human forgiveness and reconciliation.

INTRODUCTION

An unusual case of un-forgiveness was reported in England in March 2006. The Anglican vicar at St Aidan’s Church (Bristol), Reverend Julie Nicholson, admitted she was having difficulty reconciling her feelings over her daughter Jenny’s death with her role as a priest (Jennifer had died in the London bombings in July the previous year). Reverend Julie decided to step down from her parish role and just wanted to continue working with young people. She explained:

It’s very difficult for me to stand behind an altar and celebrate the Eucharistic Communion and lead people in words of peace and reconciliation and forgiveness when I feel very far from that myself... so for the time being, for the moment, that wound in me is having to heal.¹

The case was unusual not because a mother could not forgive her child’s murderer, but because somebody who was very religious admitted publicly the enormous difficulty she had in forgiving (even though the

1. “Bomb Victim Vicar Leaves Parish”, *BBC News*, 6 March 2006.

murderer himself had been killed in the blast). There has been a general conviction that those who forgive publicly have to believe in a forgiving God: otherwise, why would they do it?²

Is it true that only religious people forgive? Can we separate secular forgiveness from Christian forgiveness? Are there any limits to forgiveness? Does God always forgive? In this paper, I will try to pursue these questions.

RESENTMENT AND FORGIVENESS

Many contemporary debates about forgiveness begin from an unquestioned assumption that forgiveness is a morally superior response to resentment. It is generally presumed that the latter is rather primitive and maintains the cycles of violence when it ends up in revenge.³ Yet it seems that, in the last few decades, public opinion has been moving more towards an attitude of resentment and un-forgiveness to criminals and offenders.⁴ Rather than trying to understand why many individuals offend and become criminals, the majority of citizens prefer to write them off as evil. Rather than accept their remorse and grant them another chance, the citizens prefer to lock them up, suspecting them of manipulating the public into feeling sorry for them.

There are also some writers who defend “negative” emotions such as resentment, anger and the desire for vengeance.⁵ Robert Solomon, for instance, argues that living in an unjust world the offended need to express clearly their feelings of being hurt, cheated or neglected, and their desire to pursue justice.⁶ When they long to get even, they send a strong message to the offender that certain behaviours are unacceptable and they will not tolerate them. He admits that legal institutions are needed to prevent hatred and spite from getting out of hand. What is more, these negative passions, he contends, while establishing a sense of justice, support at the same time the work of those very institutions. Hatred may motivate good people to fight evil. Anger and resentment assure them that their rights must be respected. When their rights are

2. Peter Stanford, “Challenge of Forgiveness”, *Tablet*, 21 October 2006, 8.

3. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, “Forgive and Not Forget: Reconciliation between Forgiveness and Resentment”, in Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn (eds.), *Taking Wrongs Seriously: Apologies and Reconciliation* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2006) 83-100, see p. 83.

4. See Jim Considine, *Restorative Justice: Healing the Effects of Crime* (rev. ed., Lyttelton NZ: Ploughshares Publications, 1999) 17-19; Robert F. Drinan, “America’s Prisons in the Dock”, *Tablet*, 21 October 2006, 9.

5. See Jeffrie G. Murphy, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 18-19; Robert Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origins of the Social Contract* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1990) 33.

6. Solomon, *A Passion for Justice*, 33.

violated, they need to desire and act to make things right; to put things in balance by imposing harm on those who harmed them. Consequently, according to him, there is no justice without retribution. Solomon softens his stance saying that revenge does not always have to be violent or create cycles of violence. One may have revenge by simply voting for another person at a meeting.⁷ In some instances this soft option might be true, but when someone has been wounded, hurt or abused, when his or her loved one has been violently killed, one reaction is to try to make the offender suffer at least as much as they have suffered. But such attitude does generate more violence and more suffering on both sides. Cases in which this factor appears to play or to have played a significant part include the long-standing though now quiescent “troubles” in Northern Ireland, the never-ending conflicts in the Middle East, and more recently in Iraq. Actually, Solomon himself unveils the true face of resentment when he tries to find its limits.

If resentment has a desire, it is in its extreme form the total annihilation, prefaced by the utter humiliation, of its target – though the vindictive imagination of resentment is such that even that might not be good enough.⁸

It appears that those who harbour extreme resentment and hatred neither show mercy, nor intend to give another chance to their offenders.

Solomon and other defenders of resentment are not completely wrong, though. Resentment experienced straight after an offence⁹ does not inevitably mean a lack of forgiveness in the future. In particular, when someone has been hurt intentionally, a feeling of resentment seems logical and proper. The duration of initial resentment would depend on the circumstances of the offence, the attitude of the offender and the disposition of the victim.¹⁰ Individual differences concerning the intensity of resentment help to identify whether the resentment experienced by the victim is temporary or lasting. Lasting resentment clearly corresponds with the concept of un-forgiveness. Thus, various forms of resentment may end with forgiveness, revenge or other ways of

7. Solomon, *A Passion for Justice*, 275-77.

8. Solomon, *A Passion for Justice*, 266.

9. Some writers distinguish between “sudden anger” (initial resentment) and “settled anger” (deliberate resentment). “Sudden anger” is valuable because it helps victims defend themselves from sudden force, violence or opposition. “Settled anger” is destructive in the sense that it may lead the offended to intentional malice and revenge. For more information, see Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 22-24.

10. Etienne Mullet, Felix Neto, and Sheila Riviere, “Personality and Its Effects on Resentment, Revenge, Forgiveness, and Self-Forgiveness”, in Everett L. Worthington (ed.), *Handbook of Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 159-81, see p. 160.

closure, such as formal complaint and oblivion.¹¹ It is worth noting that the absence of revenge does not automatically mean forgiveness. Nor does the presence of resentment need to be followed by revenge. Forgiveness is possible even after a long-lasting state of resentment.

Yet the current shift of public opinion towards an attitude of resentment and un-forgiveness to criminals and offenders may raise some questions. Do we promote vengeance because, not having a well-defined concept of forgiveness, we are unable to rise to the challenge of forgiveness? If we forgive someone, is there still a place for justice? Forgiveness comes from love. What does Jesus teach about God's forgiveness and love? How is divine forgiveness connected with the process of reconciliation through Christ?

DIVINE FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

In Christian belief, the process of reconciliation begins with God. People are incapable of reconciling themselves fully with the Creator whom they have offended by their disobedience and sin.

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor 5:18-19).

Paul emphasises that it is God who reconciles, and people who are reconciled. This reconciliation, he elaborates, comes through Christ and gives a new meaning to the relationship between God and people.

Reconciliation is a gift of God which nobody can merit or earn. But still the gift is not automatically put into effect in people's lives. Paul says that people are "justified by faith", but he does not say that they are "reconciled by faith".¹² What then is the difference between "justification" and "reconciliation" in the believer's relationship with God? Margaret Thrall points out that God, as judge, might formally relieve a person of guilt and cancel the penalty for their offence. But behaving in this way, God would justify the person without engaging in genuine relationship with them. The fact that God has reconciled people to God's self means that God has entered into a deeper personal relationship with human beings. And God has done so through the

11. Mullet, Neto, and Riviere, "Personality and Its Effects", 161.

12. Ralph P. Martin, "Reconciliation: Romans 5:1-11", in Sven K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (eds.), *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 36-48. see p. 46.

Christ-event which boldly displays God's love for humanity.¹³ Nonetheless, people have also to engage themselves in this personal relationship with God. Reconciliation must involve both parties; otherwise it remains incomplete. For this reason, Paul formulates an appeal to conversion while insisting: "we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20).

There are stories in the New Testament, such as Jesus' cure of the paralytic (Mark 2:3-12), the sinful woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50), Jesus' promise of Paradise to the thief (Luke 23:39-43) and Jesus' reconciliation with the deeply moved Simon Peter in the post-Easter appearance at Galilee (John 21:15-19) that deepen the issue of how Jesus forgives sins and reconciles people.

In Mark's story of the healing of the paralytic, Jesus acknowledges the faith of those who brought the lame man to him as having their share in the healing. "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'son, your sins are forgiven.'" (Mark 2:5). Jesus' opponents are scandalised that he claims the authority to forgive. A human sin, they reason, shames and dishonours God.¹⁴ God, as any noble person, is expected to demand satisfaction in order to restore the divine honour. To forgive means to declare the renunciation of satisfaction. Only God can make such a declaration. Jesus' forgiveness here means God will not seek satisfaction for the paralytic's sins. From the challenge-riposte exchange Jesus comes out successful. His statement that he heals the sick man "so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2:10) makes the claim almost explicit.¹⁵ Although the story does not mention any prior repentance on the part of the paralytic, the faith of his friends has probably won him the pre-disposition of accepting Jesus' healing and forgiveness.

Luke's story of the woman at the house of Simon the Pharisee is another example of divine forgiveness. The woman who is identified as a sinner anoints the feet of Jesus. The Pharisee is disconcerted and questions Jesus' reputation. Jesus explains to him: "I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love"

13. Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1 (chs. 1-7) ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) 444.

14. In an honour-shame society, as was the first-century Mediterranean world, sin was a violation of interpersonal relationships; see Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptics Gospels* (2d ed., Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003) 364.

15. For further discussion, see Paul Ellingworth, "Forgiveness of Sins", in Joel B. Green, Scot McNight, and Howard Marshall (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 241; Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary*, 153-54, 368-69; Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Conflict in Luke: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991) 59.

(Luke 7:47). At the end of the story, he tells the woman: "Your sins are forgiven" (Luke 7:48). And, in front of the shocked dinner participants, he concludes: "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:50). In this story, faith and repentance expressed in her great love is evident.

Signs of repentance and faith are also clear in Luke's account of the remorseful thief. Hearing his confession: "we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds" (Luke 23:41), Jesus utters the words of reconciliation which indirectly include forgiveness of sins: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Without forgiveness, reconciliation would be unlikely.

The story of Jesus' reconciliation with Peter after the Resurrection, according to John, makes divine forgiveness and reconciliation even clearer. Jesus asks Peter three times: "Do you love me" (John 21:15-17)? And three times he commissions Peter to care for the community of Christ's followers. The threefold question, answer and commission is not only an indirect response to Peter's triple denial but also stresses the crucial importance of Peter's love of Jesus for his relationship with the Lord. What is more this love will be evidenced in Peter's life "when he cares for Jesus' sheep, not apart from that care".¹⁶ Love of God without the love of the neighbour does not exist.

In all these stories, although each of them is very personal and unique, divine love and forgiveness bring about reconciliation with God. Faith in God and love (even coming from the third party, as the story of the healing of the paralytic indicates) seem to make the sinner capable of accepting them and of changing his or her life. The interrelation between the human and the divine, as Robert Schreiter puts it, "involves divine initiative coming through human action".¹⁷

Does then God always forgive sins? From the above discussion it becomes quite apparent that God is always ready to forgive sins provided the sinner is ready to accept this divine grace.

Can people also forgive the sins of others? Is human forgiveness equal to God's forgiveness? What does Jesus expect from his followers when he encourages them to forgive?

16. Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection", in Leander E. Keck and others (eds.), *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol. IX Luke and John* (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1995) 493-865, see p. 864.

17. Robert J. Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1998) 15.

HUMAN FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

Christianity brings a significant development in the concept of forgiveness. It intends to lessen the distance between divine and human forgiveness. Many New Testament texts, for instance the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4) and the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23-35), exhort Christians not only to repent before God and accept God's forgiveness but also to forgive others.

These texts further insist that Christians must forgive as many times as they want to be forgiven themselves. In contrast, some other texts command forgiveness to be given to those who regret their offences. This condition, for example, is displayed in Jesus' teaching: "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" (Luke 17:3-4). The parable of the unforgiving servant also presents the two debtors as those who ask for cancellation of their debts. And the procedure for dealing with an erring member of the church is to "go and point out the fault" (Matt 18:15); "if (the member) listens to you", reconciliation may take place.

But this cannot lead to the conclusion that forgiveness can be given only to a repentant offender. Jesus' teaching is rich with exhortations to love one's enemies. A follower of Christ is forbidden either to take vengeance (Matt 5:39) or to bear resentment (Rom 12:19-21) against anyone. They must forgive, even if the offender does not show any remorse, because enmity toward any human being constitutes enmity toward God. Luke's account of the encounter of Saul with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus is an additional argument for this conclusion. Before his conversion Saul fought against Christians, who were regarded by Pharisees as the enemies of God. But the voice from heaven identifying itself as Jesus Christ said: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5). This stance is supported by the assurance of Jesus given to those who care about others: "Truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt 25:40).

Like divine forgiveness, human forgiveness is also a gift. God first offered this gift while reconciling people through Christ. People experience God's reconciling activity in their personal lives, families and community. The more they experience and treasure forgiveness both

from God and from others, the easier it is for them to understand what forgiveness is and to forgive their brothers and sisters.¹⁸

However, human forgiveness is different from God's forgiveness. People cannot absolve the sins of others as God does. When they grant forgiveness, their offender still needs to answer for the harm done to them, to God, to self, and to the society. William Meninger clarifies that "to forgive is divine. It does share in the unconditional love which comes from God – but only God gives absolution – and only the sinner can seek it".¹⁹ Hence, even if Christians forgive, they absolve neither the guilt nor the responsibility of the offender. When offering forgiveness, they aim above all at overcoming their desire for revenge, hatred and resentment toward the perpetrator, not by denying the rights to such feelings but by striving to view the offender with compassion.²⁰

Joseph Liechty distinguishes three features in the concept of human forgiveness. They are forgiveness as "letting go", "love given before" and "absolution".²¹ In forgiveness as "letting go", he contends, forgivers generally need to let go of three things that will otherwise (in the long run) do damage to them: revenge, punishment – exactly proportionate to the harm done, and (as far as possible) the negative feelings, such as hating the other and willing evil for him or her. And if the practice of forgiveness is to be profound, one thing cannot be let go of, that is, the justice claim that calls for forgiveness. Forgiving is a way of dealing with a justice claim that stems from experienced harm. Although it is different from other ways of dealing with justice, it is definitely not the abandonment of justice. True, forgiveness sacrifices some of the claims of justice but it may resist injustice and even withdraw from the relationship to the unjust.

The second feature, forgiving as "love given before", is based on love "being understood in this case in the entirely unsentimental sense of willing, seeking and extending oneself for the good of another".²² Stories like Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus and the parable of the prodigal son are the instances of this type of forgiveness in the New

18. A psychotherapeutic clinical research shows that although, in general, religiosity helps victims to forgive, it has very little to do with forgiving a sexual abuse perpetrator, see Jennie G. Noll, "Forgiveness in People Experiencing Trauma", in Everett L. Worthington (ed.), *Handbook of Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 363-75, see pp. 367-68.

19. William A. Meninger, *The Process of Forgiveness* (New York: Continuum, 1996) 31.

20. Mullet, Neto, and Riviere, "Personality and Its Effects", 160.

21. Joseph Liechty, "Putting Forgiveness in Its Place: The Dynamics of Reconciliation", in David Tombs and Joseph Liechty (eds.), *New Directions in Theology* (Aldershot UK: Ashgate, 2006) 59-68, see p. 61-65.

22. Liechty, "Putting Forgiveness in Its Place", 62.

Testament. They clearly indicate love given before and apart from anything that the other person could contribute to earn or deserve it.

Why should the offended care, one may ask, about the good of those who have caused them or others outrageous pain and humiliation? Why should they protect the wellbeing of the oppressor when he or she has trampled on and scattered their happiness and integrity? Timothy Jackson explains that we should not deny to others what we require for ourselves.²³ On the one hand, acceptance of the universality of moral guilt, and thus of the universal need for forgiveness should be the primary motive for love and mercy towards the persecutors: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone" (John 8:7). Forgiving others is a way of expressing the gratitude for the forgiveness God has shown the forgiver. On the other hand, Christ goes a step further and commands his followers to be merciful and love others as God loves each person in order to participate in the holiness of God. God makes the 'sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt 5:45). And further:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.... Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:32-33, 36).

Forgiving is undoubtedly a work of love that stems from God's unconditional love for all people. It respects humanity as the community of God's children. People are made in the divine image. Therefore, even if Christians dare not invite another back into their physical company because he or she has not yet repented and may re-offend,²⁴ when they forgive, they still respect the dignity of that person and leave the door open for reconciliation.

The third feature of forgiveness, according to Liechty, is forgiving as "absolution". It takes place as a response or rather as a conclusion to the repentance of the offender and forgiveness as "letting go" and "love given before" granted by the offended. "Absolution", he states, "is little more than the recognition that reconciliation has occurred."²⁵ However, he does not explain how he understands the "little more" in this statement. One may gather that he speaks about a situation where

23. Timothy P. Jackson, *The Priority of Love: Christian Charity and Social Justice* (Princeton NJ; Oxford UK: Princeton University Press, 2003) 147-49.

24. For discussion of obstacles preventing reconciliation from taking place, see Everett L. Worthington, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Theory and Application* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 198-201.

25. Liechty, "Putting Forgiveness in Its Place", 63.

forgiveness of the victim granted to a repentant perpetrator connects to God's forgiveness for, and reconciliation of, the perpetrator. As a result, reconciliation between the victim and the perpetrator takes place.²⁶

"Forgiving as absolution" then will depend on the repentance of the perpetrator. Without any signs of repentance, forgiveness can occur without reconciliation. The offended can give up the emotions of resentment, hatred and anger without restoring a relationship with the offender.²⁷

Human forgiveness, therefore, differs significantly from divine forgiveness. The former can take place without reconciliation, the latter cannot. God knows the heart of a sinner and always forgives (absolves) and reconciles to God's self provided the sinner is willing to come back to the Father and to begin a new life. This does not depend on whether those offended have forgiven him or her. Nonetheless, a part of the repentance of the sinner is to make serious attempts to restore the relationship with the victims.

When Christ encourages his followers to forgive, he first of all requires from them forgiving as "letting go" and "love given before". These are two features of the same forgiveness that cannot be separated. They do not require, as a precondition, the repentance of the offender. For this reason, the offended can forgive also those who have hurt them and are unknown to them, who will always despise them, or who do not accept the responsibility for the harm done, or who are already dead. But human forgiveness neither minimises nor absolves the guilt or the responsibility of the offender. When survivors forgive, they simply convey approval that the offender is able to change and to atone for what has been done to them; that reconciliation is possible. Cynthia Ngewu, the mother of Christopher Piet, one of the victims of apartheid, seems to aim at this understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation in her statement given to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa:

This thing called reconciliation...if I am understanding it correctly... if it means this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back...then I agree, then I support it all.²⁸

26. Complete reconciliation, however, will take place only when all things are brought together in Christ at the end of time; see Schreier, *The Ministry of Reconciliation*, 19.

27. Clinical research approves a possibility for healing through forgiveness without reconciliation, see Noll, "Forgiveness in People Experiencing Trauma", 367.

28. Quoted in Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000) 142.

Whenever possible, therefore, human forgiveness should connect with the divine forgiveness ("forgiving as absolution") of the repentant perpetrator and conclude in reconciliation with him or her.

PRACTICE OF FORGIVENESS

Even with this clearer understanding of the difference between human and divine forgiveness, offering forgiveness still remains problematic. Because a person's dignity and trust once shattered is very difficult to restore, forgiveness takes place at its own pace, and not all trauma and wounds can be healed.

Granting forgiveness does not happen instantly. It requires a process and involves more than one single decision. The process normally begins with abandoning the desire for revenge. But even later on some present events and words can trigger the anger caused by the past hurts. This probably happens because forgiveness operates on many emotional levels, and the past painful memories are still there. Therefore, once the offended have offered forgiveness, they will still need to repeat and strengthen their decision at different stages of the process.

In order to explain why the forgiver often has to repeat his or her offer, Robert Enright and colleagues distinguish two main patterns of the process of forgiveness.²⁹ In the first pattern, the offended party seems to forgive primarily for his or her own sake. Many people arrive at a decision to forgive when their emotional pain is so intense that they must do something in order to feel better (decisional forgiveness). But over time forgiveness begins to appear to them not only as a value for themselves but also as a gift to others. When this happens, forgivers move to the second pattern and are ready to forgive for the sake of the others (emotional forgiveness). The amount of trust forgivers have gained towards offenders, and the length of time passed since the offence took place play a significant role in connecting the two patterns.³⁰

Forgiveness is also a choice that people should be allowed to make, in appropriate time, without fear or favour. When people are challenged to forgive, they seem to need time to accommodate slowly to the idea. True, the move toward forgiveness is often a move toward personal integration, but forgiveness can never be demanded. Forced forgiveness

29. Robert D. Enright, Suzanne Freedman, and Julio Rique, "The Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness", in Robert Enright and Joanna North (eds.), *Exploring Forgiveness* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998) 46-62, see pp. 54-55. Everett Worthington explores the two patterns as decisional and emotional forgiveness, see *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, 55-59.

30. Enright, Freedman, and Rique, "The Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness", 54-55.

is destructive. Victims of oppression may very easily become more traumatised or move to feelings of guilt when they are hurried to forgive their oppressors. During the process of national reconciliation in South Africa, a young woman complained:

What really makes me angry about the TRC and Tutu is that they are putting pressure on me to forgive.... I don't know if I will ever be able to forgive. I carry this ball of anger within me and I don't know where to begin dealing with it. The oppression was bad, but what is much worse, what makes me even angrier, is that they are trying to dictate my forgiveness.³¹

The offended, nonetheless, should be helped to understand the consequences of their choice. Without forgiving, one will continue hating oneself, having low self-esteem, and identifying oneself as a victim.³² Thus, one remains continually an obstacle for one's own healing.³³

As hard as it may be to forgive an enemy, Janet Cherry is certain, while reflecting on cases from the apartheid era, that the offence most difficult to forgive is betrayal. How can one find any understanding or compassion toward former friends who turned informers, or former freedom fighters who, for their own safety or rewards, infiltrated the liberation movement? "An enemy met on equal terms" she thinks, "can be forgiven for killing of a loved one or a comrade. One of your own side, whose betrayal led to such a death, cannot be so easily forgiven."³⁴

Another important aspect in a process of forgiveness is the fact that even if the offended forgive, some of their scars and pains will have no permanent cure. A survivor of torture, Claude Marie Barbour, highlights:

Understanding the world of survivors means one must be aware that the trauma we have suffered will always be with us. With God's grace, with the help of friends and professionals, we attempt to reconstruct our shattered lives and reach a stage where the traumatic events no longer dominate, even though the scars of suffering always remain.³⁵

31. Quoted in Lyn S. Graybill, *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Miracle or Model?* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002) 50.

32. Meninger, *The Process of Forgiveness*, 26-28.

33. Noll, "Forgiveness in People Experiencing Trauma", 363.

34. Janet Cherry, "Historical Truth: Something to Fight For", in Charles Villa-Vicencio and Wilhelm Verwoerd (eds.), *Looking Back Reaching Forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2000) 134-43, see p. 140.

35. Claude Marie Barbour, "The Return: Returning to and from the Place of Pain", *New Theology Review* 17/1 (2004) 5-15, see p. 6.

She is certain that the pain may further lessen when survivors of torture and oppression transform their traumatic experience into a gift to others by committing themselves to helping the poor and marginalised and those victimised by cruel regimes.³⁶ This may be happening because after successful removal of the hatred, an existential void and the loss of self are often experienced. Survivors need to replace them with something that engenders self-worth, such as works of altruism and charity that will help create positive emotions within them and fill in the emptiness.

Forgiveness comes from love because nothing can compensate for cruelty and acts of violence. What then is the relationship between justice and love?

JUSTICE AND LOVE

Every person maintains some sense of what is right or just in his or her relationship with others. Even small children are able to notice unfairness in games, or in distribution of gifts. This sense of justice helps one be aware of boundaries of acceptable behaviour, delivers a sense of predictability in one's dealings with others, and gives confidence that benefits and burdens will be equitably distributed. When justice has been violated against either one's self or others, one usually makes attempts to restore it.

The determination to be fair and just should not only stay on the level of person's feelings but reach his or her will. People need to will to go beyond themselves and their own interests to respect the rights of others. (The Ten Commandments are all preoccupied with justice; the last seven focus on strict justice although most of them aim at justice by prohibition.) What is due to the person in justice must be returned or granted (e.g., the exact value of the item damaged, the wage agreed upon and appropriate to the work done). Love, in turn, goes even further because it not only respects the rights of others but also cares for their total good, no matter whether they have just claims or not.

Yet the moral obligations of justice are occasionally more strict than those of love. This is because they demand absolute equality (between the loan and the repayment, the damage and the restitution), that is "a precise fulfilment of an obligation".³⁷ In order to fulfil them, I need to keep clear distinction between what is "mine" and what is "yours". Otherwise we may find ourselves in a situation where we believe we are giving something out of charity and actually we are offering others only

36. Barbour, "The Return", 14.

37. Benedict M. Ashley, *Living the Truth in Love: A Biblical Introduction to Moral Theology* (New York: Alba House, 1996) 274.

what they justly deserve.³⁸ In this way love, building on justice and going beyond it, lays the foundations of a true relationship between individuals and groups of people.

Although love exceeds justice, it cannot override or substitute for justice. Justice demands respect for one's rights and differences. Without justice the personal space (privacy, freedom) in which one operates and feels secure is diminished. People no longer can rest, develop themselves or share their love. Justice provides and protects the space of each individual that is needed to function properly and to share his or her gifts. Therefore, justice is an important part of love. Forgiveness is also a part of love. What is then the relationship between justice and forgiveness? Is punitive justice still possible for those who have been forgiven?

PUNISHMENT AND FORGIVENESS

Crime, according to the law, is an intentional act that is socially harmful or dangerous and as such becomes an offence against the State. Therefore, after establishing his or her accountability, the offender must be punished. Imprisonment is not the only penalty for crime; punishment may take other forms varying from capital punishment, mutilation of the body, and flogging, to fines, community service and even deferred sentences that are carried out only if an offence is repeated within a specific time. For the most vicious crimes, the main objective of punishment is to separate the perpetrator from society, and to inflict pain in proportion to the crime. Despite large flaws (especially the harmful lasting effects of imprisonment on many inmates),³⁹ the legal system tries to address, with various results, some important public interests. It punishes criminals and, if possible, takes care of their re-socialisation, orders compensation of the victim for damage or loss, and protects citizens from criminal activity.

Punitive justice, promoted and exercised by the judiciary, has been globally challenged by advocates of restorative justice. In view of the great inadequacy of punitive justice, restorative justice seeks to define crime interpersonally and aims at future reconciliation, both between victims and perpetrators, and with society at large. The emphasis lies on making a direct connection between crime and responsibility. Consequently, such acts as paying compensation to the victim or engaging in community service facilitated by the community to which the harm was done are seen as much more valuable than legal punishment.

38. Second Vatican Council, "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam actuositatem*)", 1965, # 8. Available at <www.vatican.va>.

39. See Consedine, *Restorative Justice*, 16-21, 30-37; Drinan, "America's Prisons", 9.

Furthermore, a Christian understanding of forgiveness as a precondition for reconciliation appears to rule out punishment. The parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23-35), for instance, highlights clearly this tension: retribution is divine or supernatural in character, and not temporal.

While hearing victims' pleas for fairness and noting a lack of repentance among many oppressors, it is vital to find a balance between punishment of the offender and his or her responsibility for the harm done. On the one hand, justice that is retributive without reconciliation is little short of tyranny. True justice seeks to correct the problem. On the other hand, is it enough and fair for the masterminds of oppression and of crimes against humanity merely to pay some compensation or do certain community work to be totally released from their legal accountability for all the suffering they caused? What if they refuse to change their evil ways?

It becomes clearer that wrongdoing needs to be divided into minor offences (which can be dealt on the individual or community level) and serious crimes, such as rape, murder, and child abuse (which must be reported to the police and dealt with by a judicial system). Thus, when handling minor offences, Christians should forgive and reconcile with their offenders. Serious crimes first of all must be reported to the appropriate authorities. As St Paul contends, Christians have no right to punish (Rom 12:19-21), but the State authority does have the right and Christians must comply with it (cf. Rom 13:1-7). While cooperating with the authority, they accept the final verdict. The legal system must check the abuse of freedom and the acts of brutality by criminals and, when necessary, punish them. Otherwise, honest people would live in fear and unrest, and public order would cease to exist.

As private citizens, followers of Christ can forgive regardless of whether the judiciary pursues retribution or not. The late Pope John Paul II gave an example of this. In May 1981, he was shot and seriously wounded by Mohammed Agca but survived. A few years later he went to the prison to visit his would-be assassin and to forgive him. After the act of forgiveness, Agca remained in prison. Although the Pope's forgiveness was performed in public, it was a private act. A person's forgiveness and the State's punishment seem to be compatible because they target different objectives. The former focuses on personal relationship and inner harmony. The latter prioritises public order and outer harmony in society.

Miroslav Volf contends, however, that the forgiver cannot insist on punishing the perpetrator.

A person cannot forgive while at the same time *wanting* the state to punish the offender, rather than incarcerate him for the sake of reform or restraint. In that case, one and the same agent would both forgive and want punishment exacted, and that's a contradiction. That's why those who forgive will advocate for a penal system not based on retribution.⁴⁰

It is true that those who forgive forego the personal desire to punish their offenders. They do not need, though, to become advocates for a penal system that totally excludes reckoning and retribution. In some circumstances, granting an individual what he or she "rightly deserves" can prove beneficial provided that "it is grounded in some morality-based principle, such as the correction of harmful behaviour on the part of the wrongdoer or the restoration of the victim's status".⁴¹ Sin cannot be used as a synonym for crime.

According to Christian belief, as Karl Rahner maintains, human freedom is exercised as the ability to make free choices that shape reality.⁴² An evil choice not only makes the perpetrator guilty but also leaves some lasting consequences in the world. Even a turning back to God and a free rejection of one's previous evil actions, being solely human acts, do not have the power to overcome the guilt and the consequences. Christian faith, however, assures everyone that there is a God who, despite all the personal freedom of human beings, is able to overcome the deleterious power of the evil deed. Therefore, only in the unconditional love of God, Rahner concludes, can guilt be eliminated and reconciliation take place.

Gabriel Daly further develops the religious element of hope which is absent in the secular means for dealing with evil:

... "sin" belongs to the language of revelation and faith. To call a crime a sin is to give it a mantle of hope, investing it with religious significance by recognising that it is expiable and above all, remediable. It depicts a condition requiring a doctor not a gaoler, grace rather than retribution.⁴³

This leads to conclusion that even if some criminals show signs of repentance and seek divine forgiveness for a serious crime, the institutions of

40. Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2005) 171.

41. Peter C. Hill, Julie Juola Exline, and Adam B. Cohen, "The Social Psychology of Justice and Forgiveness in Civil and Organizational Settings", in Everett L. Worthington (ed.), *Handbook of Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 482.

42. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 21, trans. Hugh M. Riley (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1988) 258-62.

43. Gabriel Daly, "Interpreting Original Sin", *Priests and People* 10 (1996) 87-91, see p. 88.

the criminal justice system (police, court proceedings, prison) are still required in order to ensure that they are not a danger to society before they are judged ready to return to it as free citizens. The suffering of, and the injustice done to, the offended party should not be easily put behind by public authorities. Otherwise they are likely to re-occur.

Nonetheless, where possible, Christians must advocate for restorative justice over punitive justice in a penal system. Re-establishing a sense of justice through the restoration of the humanity and the dignity of both the offended and the offender brings harmony and peace to society. This rarely happens through punishment alone, although punishment might contribute to it.

CONCLUSION

God always forgives (absolves) sins when, through love and repentance (actual or anticipated), people open themselves to forgiving grace. While forgiving, God reconciles them to Godself and makes their guilt expiable in either this life or the next.

Although the concept of forgiveness in Christianity intends to diminish the distance between divine and human forgiveness, it does not make the two equal. When followers of Christ forgive, they do not absolve the guilt or the responsibility of those who sin against them. They merely try hard to view their perpetrators with compassion and to let go of their desire for revenge, the demand for punishment (to the extent deserved), and the negative feelings that will evil for the offenders. Even though forgiveness aims first of all at the good of the perpetrator ("love given before"), at the same time it liberates the forgiver from the bondage made by the vile deed. This liberation is the freedom from hatred, anger, resentment and other crippling emotions that tear victims apart and lead to despair. In order to enhance both personal integrity and social harmony, Christians need to forgive always, and if the offender repents, be reconciled with him or her. However, forgiveness can never be forced or demanded. Forgiveness is a gift, not a right! Forgiving originates in God's unconditional love for all people and, when offered, expresses the believer's gratitude for the forgiveness God grants him or her constantly.

Since serious sin not only separates the offender from God, but also imposes suffering and injustice in the lives of the offended, it needs to be dealt with as both a theological and a social phenomenon.