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From Conflict to Communion: An Examination of Christian Forgiveness

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Following the appalling era of apartheid in South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission convened in 1996 with the purpose of repairing the tattered fabric of South African society by means of a type of reconciliation that flows from the telling of horrific truths. Although “justice” was an important watchword of the amnesty hearings of the commission, it became apparent that true reconciliation and realistic hope for the future would not be forged by mere justice.¹ Archbishop Desmond Tutu expressed simply and poignantly this conclusion: “Without forgiveness there is no future.”² Tutu’s conviction stems principally from his Christian faith, a faith shared by the majority of the South African people. It is not surprising that this profound and stirring conclusion arises in a people for whom the Christian faith has been and continues to be fundamental, for forgiveness stands at the very core of the Christian religion. Recounting the identity-constituting event of Christianity, Luke portrays an expiring Jesus on the cross, enjoining his Father, even while suffering the agony of crucifixion, to “forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

¹Public Broadcasting Service, *Facing the Truth with Bill Moyers*, video documentary, 30 March 1999 (available as a videocassette).

²Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

Christian forgiveness, seen in relation to justice, repentance, and grace, is the gift that allows movement from conflict to communion between estranged parties. It is a powerful force for reconciliation and a central element of Christian faith.

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This essay will address the vital concept of Christian forgiveness—particularly important in a world of culture conflicts, mass genocide, and brutal terrorist attacks. The goal of the essay will be to situate the Christian notion of forgiveness in its broader systematic framework, insisting that a comprehensive *Christian* por-

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trayal of forgiveness requires a joint consideration of both divine and human forgiveness, with priority given to the former.³ The essay contends that Christian forgiveness is best understood as the important central facet of the movement from conflict to communion between two estranged parties wherein the wronged party *graciously* ceases to hold the act of wrong against the agent of the wrong. But this definition of forgiveness must be fleshed out along the way with regard to various other important matters. I will first examine the *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) of forgiveness. Then the bulk of the essay will be a consideration of three important topics that are intimately connected to Christian forgiveness: justice, repentance, and grace.

THE CONTEXT OF FORGIVENESS

Although forgiveness is central to Christianity, it does not happen in a vacuum. The idea of forgiveness itself presupposes division and distorted harmony. Stated simply, forgiveness presupposes that there is something to forgive. Forgiveness, then, comes into play in situations of conflict and wrongdoing.⁴ Therefore, the role of forgiveness is only clear in light of God’s original creative intention for human beings: harmonious communion—with God, other human beings, and the natural world. L. Gregory Jones rightly shows that the Triune God is characterized by loving and self-giving communion among the three persons, and that God intends human beings to participate in that communion and to reflect it in their own relationships with one another.⁵ As Tutu puts it, “It is and has always been God’s intention that we should live in friendship and harmony.”⁶ But the reality of broken fellowship and destructive conflict testifies solemnly to the ruinous effects of human sin. Furthermore, this is the case both on the divine and human level. Between human beings and God the conflict of sin, which Karl Barth calls a “break” between Creator and creature,⁷ renders it impossible for natural human beings to

³See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 100.

⁴Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) 37, makes it clear that *conflict* is the central context of forgiveness in human life.

⁵L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) 113-119.

⁶Tutu, *No Future*, 263.

⁷Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3/3, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960) 293-294.

enter into communion with the holy Triune God. Between human beings, sin causes the conflicts of selfishness, inhumanity, hatred, and perversity. If the divine communion, especially evident in Jesus' relationship to his Father, is indeed definitive of proper humanity, then these conflicts obstruct the harmonious communion that typifies the sort of life that is properly "human." Thus understood, forgiveness may be interpretively situated in the schema of conflict→forgiveness→restored communion (reconciliation). More will be said about this schema throughout this essay, but it is sufficient and necessary at the moment to note this *Sitz im Leben* of the concept of forgiveness, on both the divine and human level.⁸

FORGIVENESS AND JUSTICE

We turn to a consideration of three important concepts, each related closely to forgiveness. It is first necessary to consider these issues in relation to God's forgiveness of human beings before considering them with regard to human forgiveness of other human beings. The reason for this is partly methodological, but it is also true, as Stanley Hauerwas points out with regard to peacemaking, that Christians can only enter the business of forgiving as those who understand themselves to be forgiven. That is to say, Christians are persons who may forgive because they understand themselves as already forgiven by God. "[W]e must and can confront one another as sinners, because we understand ourselves to share with the other our having been forgiven. We thus share a common history of forgiveness and repentance which makes our willingness to confront one another a process of peace rather than simply another way to continue conflict."⁹

In any case, as we consider God's forgiveness of human beings, we are confronted first with the noteworthy fact that God's forgiveness requires *justice*. In the Old Testament this is apparent in the Levitical regulations that govern what Walter Brueggemann calls the "remarkable festival of atonement."¹⁰ The different sacrificial offerings satisfy the justice of God and allow the relationship between Israel and Yahweh to "exist in a condition of well-being and authentic mutuality," rather than "a condition of alienation and hostility."¹¹ The offerings are the grounds for God's forgiveness of the people. The same is true in the New Testament, but in this case it is the universal, "once for all" (Heb 7:27) sacrifice of Jesus Christ that provides atonement, or justice, for the sins of the world. This death, among other

⁸The central role of forgiveness is often forgotten in theological treatments of conflict resolution. This is the case with *some* versions of liberation theology that focus almost univocally on "justice" and "deliverance" as the solutions to conflict. Although these are important aspects of the conflict resolution process, such a focus can too easily ignore the core element of forgiveness. Thus, Volf argues that any talk of liberation—especially in situations of culture conflict—should take place in the larger context of "embrace" (*Exclusion and Embrace*, 101-105).

⁹Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988) 94.

¹⁰Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 666.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 667. Brueggemann points out, significantly, that the sacrificial practices of Israel were also expressions of Israel's love and loyalty to Yahweh.

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things, satisfies the justice of God, thus making possible forgiveness for all and reconciliation of the estrangement between the Triune God and human beings. This is not to say that God's forgiveness is *solely* made possible by justice, for it is only by

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the grace of God that such measures meant to satisfy justice were provided. But the point remains that, especially in terms of divine forgiveness, justice is intrinsic to the process. This makes clear the fact that although God's grace is unmerited and freely given, it is by no means “cheap.”¹² God's grace may be truly gracious, but it is not unrelated to and uninformed by justice.

The same point holds true with human forgiveness. Jones notes two dangers that lurk perilously on each side of the precipice of forgiveness.¹³ On the one side there is the tendency to dilute forgiveness by construing it merely “therapeutically.” This is the tendency of the modern world's love affair with psychology, in which forgiveness is a matter of individualistic “healing,” but rarely ever a stern dealing with sin and injustice. On the other side there is the tendency to think that forgiveness is ill-suited to the task of seriously addressing evil and injustice. According to this view, forgiveness, especially trite and shallow renditions of it, is inappropriate because it only increases the likelihood that hastily forgiven perpetrators will commit their crimes once again. What is necessary in this view is for crimes and wrongs to be met strongly and sternly—not meting out forgiveness easily and often.

It is the first of these dangers that is especially problematic with regard to justice and forgiveness. Jones is right in pointing out that serious evil underlies the very conflict that precipitates the need for forgiveness. This evil is obscured along the way when forgiveness is treated merely superficially as a means for individual people with basically good intentions to heal their wounded psyches. This is especially true in situations of great horror, violence, and inhumanity. Forgiveness in these situations is a gross perversion if it remains merely “therapeutic.” On the wall of my study hangs a sign meant to remind me of the injustices I witnessed when I was in Guatemala during a period of study in Central America. It is a poster from a group seeking justice in that war-torn country, the Grupo de Apoyo Mutual (Group of Mutual Support) formed by some mothers of young men who “disappeared” in the night because of their opposition to an oppressive military regime. What precipitated their “disappearances” was merely the courage to speak out

¹²See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963) 45-60. For Bonhoeffer the distinction between “cheap grace” and “costly grace” is that costly grace keeps the idea of justice (and repentance) intimately related to grace.

¹³Jones describes these dangers in *Embodying Forgiveness*, chap. 2 (“Therapeutic Forgiveness”) and chap. 3 (“Forgiveness Eclipsed”).

against the government. The sign reads: “*Con la verdad llega la conciliación*” (“Reconciliation comes with the truth”). The point is that forgiveness and reconciliation are not to be taken lightly; they require justice and truth-disclosure in order not to degenerate into sources of more violence and injustice. This is the logic behind the “amnesty” of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa: although amnesty for horrific deeds is available and reconciliation is the ultimate telos, these realities of forgiveness cannot be procured without the painful telling of the truth of one’s actions—which is a version of justice.¹⁴ In such situations, human forgiveness to a large extent ought to mirror God’s forgiveness, which requires atonement and justice of some sort, although there is always the inescapable element of grace in these situations, even when justice is a requirement.

“an emphasis on justice without remembering the inextricable grace of forgiveness robs the act of forgiveness of its truly radical power”

But the danger on the other hand, that of “forgiveness eclipsed,” becomes increasingly problematic as the emphasis on justice increases. In fact, overemphasis on justice can easily empty the concept of forgiveness of any real meaning. When the *sole* aim is on forcing perpetrators to render an eye for the eyes they have ruined, teeth for all those teeth they have knocked out, their life for the lives they have snuffed out—when all the emphasis is here, there is really not any forgiving going on. Moreover, an emphasis on justice without remembering the inextricable *grace* of forgiveness robs the act of forgiveness of its truly radical power. Seen this way, justice can prevent victims from “[breaking] apart the habits and forces that diminish and destroy” and ending the “cycles of violence.”¹⁵ And as Volf rightly reminds us, the ultimate reason we need forgiveness is because strict restorative justice can *never* be fulfilled. The same can and must be said with regard to retributive justice to an even greater extent.¹⁶ With regard to justice, “forgiveness eclipsed” and “therapeutic forgiveness” are the two chasms between which forgiveness must lightly tread, carefully judging each situation—and always with the likelihood that one of the dangers will rear an ugly head.

FORGIVENESS AND REPENTANCE

A second issue that is essential in coming to an understanding of Christian forgiveness is *repentance*. First, with regard to God’s forgiveness of human beings,

¹⁴One must guard against equating “justice” with the restorative and retributive versions of it with which we are most familiar. The situation in South Africa is a reminder that justice can come in many forms. The amnesty available through the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission goes by that name because the usual requirements of restorative and retributive justice are not necessarily invoked. But the telling of the *truth* in that situation is intended to serve as a different and creative form of *justice* that plays a crucial role in the process of reconciliation.

¹⁵Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 90.

¹⁶Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 122.

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repentance is a necessary part of the process of God's forgiveness. According to the theology of the Reformation, repentance must not be understood as a "work" of any sort that warrants a merit of God's forgiveness, but as a necessary part of the God-ordained means by which God *freely* grants forgiveness to human beings who are utterly unworthy of such a gift. Repentance in this sense should be understood as the act (or process) of turning around (*metanoia*). It is a part of the lifestyle by which human beings come progressively to understand themselves as people forgiven by God. John Calvin thus describes repentance as the human mortification of one's sinful flesh and coming to hate sin, and the vivification of the God-given spirit of truth and holiness by which one comes alive to God and desires to live rightly in gratitude for God's forgiveness.¹⁷ For Calvin, a life of repentance is the essence of sanctification. This is why Bonhoeffer rails against the cheap grace of "forgiveness without requiring repentance."¹⁸ His polemic demonstrates that God's forgiveness is bestowed on those who recognize their depravity and are intent on "changing their mind" (the literal meaning of *metanoia*) for the future.

With regard to human forgiveness, it is clear that the repentance of the perpetrator is an important stage in fostering the role of forgiveness in the journey from conflict back to communion. Repentance is valuable, and in the most desirable situation it will have an irreducible role. It is a significant part of changing the heart of the offender, not just of leading the situation of disunity back to some form of communion. By repentance the doer of the wrong indicates that he or she is sorry and desires that the situation never repeat itself. In a word, the person desires to change. And this is a key to preventing forgiveness from becoming a merely therapeutic measure, temporarily and superficially changing a situation, but potentially only justifying the repetition of history.

But forgiveness cannot be unilaterally dependent on repentance. One reason for this is that insistence on the priority of repentance in many cases will prevent the dismantling of cycles of hatred and violence. This reason obviously runs parallel to Jones's argument regarding the dangers of overemphasis on justice. This is especially important in situations where the perpetrator of a wrong refuses to repent. What was true with justice is also true with repentance: an unqualifiedly absolute requirement of repentance in human forgiveness can easily obscure the ubiquitous element of grace that dwells in forgiveness by definition.

Secondly, an absolute insistence on the priority of repentance in the process of forgiveness makes the victim dependent on the agent of the wrong. If the perpetrator refuses to repent and ask the victim for forgiveness, the victim, on this view, is not free to get on with his or her life. If forgiveness is dependent on repentance, then the lack of repentance hinders the commencement of the process of healing in the life of the victim. Therefore a more adequate understanding of forgiveness

¹⁷John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 3.3.3-8.

¹⁸Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 47.

must, as with justice, walk with a foot on each side of the line of repentance, realizing on the one hand that repentance is a desirable catalyst to reconciliation especially in that it shows a change in the offender, and on the other hand that forgiveness must be understood in such a way that it may proceed unimpeded, in one way or another, with *or without* the repentance of the perpetrator.

FORGIVENESS AND GRACE

The third and perhaps most important issue to be discussed with regard to the Christian concept of forgiveness is the idea of *grace*. The one attribute of God that most comprehensively characterizes the way God relates to human beings is that of grace. This grace, of course, flows out of the love that is God's very being (1 John 4:16). This grace is the fount of God's forgiveness—making the justice of atonement possible and making it possible for human repentance to mean anything at all. Grace is at the very root of God's forgiveness, for it demonstrates the extraordinary measures that God will go to in order to move from conflict to communion with God's own creatures. Jones echoes Barth's language by speaking of this as the Triune God's "journey into the far country" in the person of Jesus Christ who graciously "goes to the cross as the One who accomplishes the judgment of the world such that he bears our sin, our judgment, in order to bear it away."¹⁹ This gracious bearing of judgment makes forgiveness possible.

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Human forgiveness also flows from grace. As has been apparent all along in this essay, justice and repentance are crucial in the forgiveness process, but they require the corrective notion of grace in order not to decay into a continuation of the process of hurt, sin, and violence. Indeed, they must be understood within the context of grace. At bottom, forgiveness cannot be grounded in justice or repentance. For just as God's grace brings sinners back into communion with the Triune God, so also truly gracious forgiveness can restore communion among human beings. It is here that we witness the inexplicable power of grace.

By surveying three important issues that pertain to Christian forgiveness we have seen that Christian forgiveness is best appreciated as the important central movement of the process from conflict to communion between two estranged parties wherein the wronged party graciously ceases to hold the act of wrong against the offender. This is, of course, based on the desirable scenario where justice and repentance precede forgiveness and where communion is even possible. But even

¹⁹Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 119, 123. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4/1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956) esp. 157-210.

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when communion is not possible either because justice is impossible or the perpetrator refuses to repent, forgiveness is still possible as part of the victim's movement from inner conflict and turmoil wherein she or he ceases to hold the wrong against the offender and can thus move on with her or his life—a communion and reconciliation of sorts. Perhaps in this regard it is necessary to make a fluid distinction between an external forgiveness, one that occurs explicitly between the two conflicted parties, and an internal forgiveness, one that takes place in the mind and heart of the offended party, yet still with reference to the offender and the offense. Given the foregoing, a revised schematic of the Christian notion of forgiveness would be: conflict→[justice and repentance]→forgiveness (grace)→communion (reconciliation).

FORGIVENESS LIVED

Although this may seem to be an appropriate ending point, the complexities of the topic at hand require a few more words, at the risk of trying to say too much. Three brief cautions are necessary in relation to this account of the Christian notion of forgiveness. First, the necessity and desirability of forgiveness should not be interpreted as an assertion that forgiveness is easy. This is powerfully apparent in Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower* and the various responses to Wiesenthal's dilemma of forgiveness in the harrowing context of the Holocaust.²⁰ To forgive, as Wiesenthal found out, is immensely difficult and even morally problematic from certain angles. Second, since there is not always a clear "victim" and "offender," forgiveness is often a more complicated matter, requiring grace and repentance on both sides of the conflict. This is why Volf emphasizes "embrace" as the proper metaphor of reconciliation for conflicts in which both parties (perhaps even justly) claim to be victims. Third, we must remember that forgiveness should characterize the whole Christian way of life. Jones makes this point clear by arguing that forgiveness be understood as a "craft" cultivated through the whole of one's life, rather than solely as absolution of guilt in isolated situations.²¹

As Jones and others have argued, forgiveness alone is what can break the destructive cycles of life's violence. Just as God's forgiveness breaks through the estrangement between human beings and God, so also human forgiveness alone can pierce the violent and enslaving histories of estranged human beings. Forgiveness is potent as the grounds for reconciliation and communion—the ultimate goals of the process. It can even make reconciliation possible in the most unlikely of situations. And the power of reconciliation to transform the world is formidable, as is evident in the case of South Africa where reconciliation is slowly changing a violent and enmity-stricken land. As Volf makes poignantly clear, forgiveness is a requirement of the embrace for which all humans long.

²⁰Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, ed. Harry James Cargas and Bonny V. Fetterman, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Schocken, 1997).

²¹Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 5, 207-239.

An Examination of Christian Forgiveness

As a concluding note, it is worth mentioning that in practice the Bible demands a reversal of the theoretical method of this paper. I have argued that an understanding of human forgiveness should be based on the model of divine forgiveness. But the Lord's Prayer shows that human beings are not to seek for God's forgiveness except *as* they themselves are forgiving their own debtors.²² This should cause us in the Christian church to ponder carefully whether or not we, individually and corporately, are living lives of true forgiveness. ⊕



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²²Cf. Calvin's account of this petition (*Institutes*, 3.20.45.).