



4 forgiveness

forgiveness in the protestant tradition

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introducing the series

This paper is the fourth in a series of 15 papers to be produced over a two year period as part of the *Embodying Forgiveness* project run by the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland (CCCI). Drawing on a broad range of contributors, from a broad range of backgrounds, the papers aim to explore the meaning of forgiveness in the Bible and in different Christian traditions, and to ask about the implications of the practice of forgiveness for our society. It is worth saying at the outset that we have not insisted on a particular definition or understanding of forgiveness among those who will be contributing to the series. Rather, our hope is that through this series of papers we will come to a fuller and more authentic understanding of forgiveness and its implications for church and society.

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introduction

Within Protestantism there is much diversity regarding various theological issues. The theme of forgiveness is no exception.

I have decided to focus primarily on the link between forgiveness and atonement in Protestantism. I also include the struggles of two Protestant theologians with the concept of forgiveness. What follows then is a number of “snapshots” of Protestant thinking on the issue of forgiveness and the cross.

standing on the shoulders of anselm

It is widely held within Protestantism (and other Christian traditions) that God forgives us on a daily basis. How can this be? On what grounds does God forgive people?

The main answer circulating within Protestantism is that God forgives on the basis of Christ’s atoning death on the cross. This view can be traced back to its classical treatment in the work of Saint Anselm (1033-1109). The work of Anselm was a great influence on Protestant thinking about the atonement and such ideas of atonement were commonly expressed in Protestant worship around 1700 to 1850.

Anselm argued that the events of the cross provide a saving opportunity in the divine-human relationship. There are several points that are central to the argument. Humans were created righteous and destined to eternal blessedness, reaching this state by rendering obedience to God. However, such obedience is not possible for a sinful and fallen humanity. Since God’s purposes cannot be frustrated, the situation must be resolved in a way that deals with sin and its effects. Only God could provide the solution, a “God-man” – a human to pay for human sin and God to be able to render such sinless obedience in order to deal with sin. Without this humankind could not be forgiven for sin, taken as an offence against God.

The main notion in all of this is that God requires a “satisfaction” for sin – an appropriate payment or something that corrects an imbalance. Christ was the satisfaction. *Only* Christ could have been the satisfaction. But how can the death of one man be enough to provide the possibility of forgiveness? The question is easily answered. Christ was divine and not merely human. The life laid down was of infinite worth. It was not a case of one human dying for all. It was a case of a “God-man” dying for all. Both the divinity and humanity of Christ were important in this work in order to achieve forgiveness for a sinful humanity.

At the time of the Reformation there was a deep realisation and appreciation of how vital a role law had in human life and society. Law soon became the lense through which God’s forgiveness of a fallen humanity was to be viewed. Protestant writers began constructing models showing how they saw forgiveness in relation to the cross. There were several main views emerging:

forgiveness through representation

God has made a covenant with the church which is entered by faith. Christ is a “covenant representative” of humankind. Through his death on the cross as our representative Christ has made many “covenant benefits” available. One of the most important is the full forgiveness of sins and all the secondary benefits that flow from this, such as eternal life.

forgiveness through participation

This stems from a Pauline phrase that believers are “in Christ” – they participate in Christ in his glorified resurrected state. Sharing in the life of Christ means sharing in the benefits that Christ won when he obeyed his Father and died on the cross. As with the above, forgiveness of sins is one of the most important benefits won by Christ and shared by believers participating in his life. On this view it could be argued that the main function of Christ’s death is *not* atonement for the past sins of humanity “but rather,” says Sanders, “by sharing in Christ’s death, one dies to the power of sin or to the old aeon, with the result that one belongs to God. . . . The transfer takes place by participation in Christ’s death.”¹

So, when a believer, through faith, participates in Christ, he or she will share in and enjoy forgiveness of sins. God will see the righteousness of Christ as the righteousness of the believer. Such a position is very much apparent in the works of both Calvin and Luther. In fact Luther even uses the image of a marriage to describe the relationship of the believer to Christ, an image that was meant to portray a full sharing or participation in the life of the other party – as in a marriage two become one so in the believer’s relation to Christ. If there is forgiveness in Christ then the believer is forgiven indeed by virtue of the relationship with Christ through faith.

forgiveness through substitution

Sinners should have gone to the cross. However, Christ took the place of sinners, substituted for them, died in their place, took the guilt of sinners and let his righteousness be viewed as the righteousness of sinners. This then achieves forgiveness of sins for the sinner.

charles hodge (1797-1878) – no forgiveness without justice

Closely related to Anselm’s view were later models that can be labelled as ‘Penal Substitution.’ This model has become most popular in Western Protestantism. It takes the basic work of Anselm and writes legal terms into it. Anselm spoke of Christ satisfying or paying a debt we owe. In legal terms this satisfaction is inextricably linked to punishment of offenders, so Christ’s satisfaction is more to do with taking the punishment of God than with paying a debt on our behalf.

The main point in addition to the themes of Anselm is that God cannot simply decree sinners to be forgiven. God is just and as such He must punish sinners for their sin. It would be immoral and unjust to forgive otherwise. In order to morally forgive sinners, God the Father sends His Son to receive the punishment due to the sinner. Through this action the demands of justice are met and forgiveness is possible. Calvin and Luther both thought along such lines without developing a total theory and certainly without developing the place of forgiveness within that theory.

Hodge emphasises that God cannot forgive and enter into a relationship with sinners unless the demands of justice are met. Such a view has been critiqued with an argument from omnipotence. It has been reckoned that God can forgive if God wants to and it is wrong to say that he cannot because he can do everything. Such an argument fails to give a correct definition of omnipotence. It is proper to say there are things God cannot do – things such as the logically impossible and things inconsistent with God’s own character and nature. Since God is just He cannot, reckons Hodge, forgive without the demands of justice being met because to do so is contrary to His character. His just character demands that sin be

punished – “If sin be pardoned, it can be pardoned in consistency with divine justice only on the ground of a forensic penal satisfaction.”²

For Hodge sin leads to death and brings the sinner under God’s wrath. Through the cross God was working to save sinners from their dire situation. The events of the cross were deliberately orchestrated by God. It was God who caused Christ to suffer – because of our sins. Without this there could be no forgiveness of sinners that also met the demands of justice.

In order to share in Christ’s work and its results, the individual sinners must renounce their own ability to satisfy the demands of the justice of God by their own works. The sinner must trust in Christ and in his righteousness. Christ is spoken of here both as a substitute and representative of the sinner through whom the sinner is justified and forgiven.

Hodge’s view has been criticised as severely restricting the ability of God to love and forgive by an alien and unbiblical concept of justice that dictates to God how He should act. Hodges’ God is charged with being a God who wants to love, forgive and have a relationship with people but cannot because an external demand of justice, rather than divine justice, restricts Him. Many have seen in such a presentation a God who has an easier time meting out punishment with a vindictive character than forgiving sinners in love. Robin Collins sarcastically rewrote the parable of the lost son using the God he saw in the work of Hodge. When the son comes back to the father, the father says, “I cannot simply forgive you. . . it would be against the moral order of the universe. . . such is the severity of my justice that reconciliation will not be made unless the penalty is utterly paid. My wrath – my avenging justice – must be placated.”³

Hodge’s model is not the only one to come under fire. These various models and interpretations of the atonement and its relation to forgiveness have all come under criticism – especially from liberal Protestants.

In the post-Enlightenment period, there developed a discipline labelled the “History of Dogma” movement with Adolf Von Harnack as a legendary figure. A number of liberal Protestants were involved. This movement argued that underpinning the concept of penal substitution, which had been adopted by many Protestant theologians in their models of divine forgiveness of sinful humanity, lay a number of assumptions that ultimately had no grounds and which were alien intrusions into Christianity. Some of these supposed assumptions were: the concept of original sin, satisfaction and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.

Some liberal Protestants described the concept of original sin, on which these models rely, as ‘credulous.’ Surely, they say, we are only responsible for our own sin – the concept of inherited sin is morally repugnant. In fact even the idea of one person receiving the penalties of another has been viewed as morally suspect. The idea of a righteous person taking the punishment for sinners in order that the sinners can be forgiven for their sins does not appeal within liberal Protestant circles. Moreover, the idea of guilt also came under attack – ranging from modified forms of Freudian theory relating the origins of guilt to our experiences as children to other views some of which argue that guilt is subjective rather than an objective reality – all in our own heads as it were.

Despite being attacked on the above grounds, the view of the death of Christ being related to forgiveness of human sin is still largely popular, especially within mainstream orthodox Protestantism. Part of the reason for this was that the moral optimism of liberal Protestantism had itself

become 'credulous' in the 20th century with its many human atrocities. The concepts of guilt, sin, forgiveness and the necessity of an objective and external redemption became a lot more credible.

christ himself forgiven

I now turn my attention to another way of viewing forgiveness and the cross, drawing heavily from an essay by Haddon Willmer.⁴ Willmer suggests that "Christ's being forgiven is theoretically imaginable as part of the way in which [Christology, atonement and forgiveness] work together."⁵ Christ was and is almost always viewed as the one who forgives or through whom God is enabled to forgive. Most atonement theories emphasise the sinless nature of Christ as the factor through which forgiveness is won. It is never implied that Christ might need forgiveness.

Willmer's basic text for this is 2 Corinthians 5:21 regarding Christ "who knew no sin, was made sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him." The text is one that allows the sinlessness of Christ to be upheld in tandem with his being 'made sin.'

Willmer finds it reasonable to suggest that if Christ was 'made sin' but not left in this state then we could interpret what happened in between these two states as forgiveness of Christ. Willmer admits that Paul does not make such a suggestion and that he is going beyond what Paul might have wanted to suggest.

In order to fully appreciate what Willmer is saying we need to understand more of what "sin" means, especially as Willmer defines and uses it.

Christ *knew* no sin. We do know sin and sin regularly. But sin is not merely the breaking of a law. Sin and death, for Paul, were in the world before there was any law to break. When the law was given people came to *know* sin and became held accountable for it. Sin can be viewed in relation to death and/or in relation to law. Death is as much a part of sin as law and breaking law is. Focusing only on breaking laws causes us to adopt a flawed moralistic account of sin. Focusing on death as a part of sin makes it possible to see Christ as 'made sin' without neglecting his sinlessness in the sense of his never knowing sin and never breaking the law. This is the backdrop Willmer lays down to build his argument on.

So, against this background what does it mean that Christ was 'made sin'? Willmer follows Paul to Galatians 3:13 to find the explanation, ". . . cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." Jesus Christ did not know sin by breaking the law, but he "hung on a tree." Willmer also calls on Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Willmer suggests that to fall short of the glory of God is to sin. What is falling short of the glory of God? Humanity is made in God's image and has a divine mandate and duty to reflect the glory of God. When this image is marred and the glory of God not reflected then humanity has fallen short of God's glory – sinned. Sin is dehumanisation – being less than you were created to be and not fulfilling your ultimate purpose of reflecting God's glory, so argues Willmer.

So, sin has more to do with something humans are in terms of their being than something humans do or do not do, such as breaking the law. To image God is humanity's calling. Our failure to follow this calling is sin. Whereas sin in the sense of breaking a law is often a choice, many aspects of the sinful state are not chosen. Death is the ultimate sign of sin – the ultimate defacement of humanity. Death is not chosen by most but is part of this 'falling short' – in other words is sin. Death is the image of God

being undone, and this is what *makes* us sin.

“The misery in which human beings find themselves, the misery imposed on them by the experience of life is a better clue to the reality of sin, than the breaking of the law of God on one or many points. For it is the lived reality of our failure to realise the primary command under which human being lives: to image God and to reflect the glory of God. Instead we fall short of it. Even the good do this.”⁶

Willmer then says, “The disfigured derelict Jesus on the cross falls short of the glory of God, though he knew and chose no sin. He was made sin.”⁷ He was defaced and he died and thus ceased to reflect God’s glory and image. He did not choose sin but through this event was ‘made sin.’ What must be remembered in all this is that the reality of sin is more to do with failing to image God and reflect his glory than to do with breaking a command. Jesus was utterly sinless if by sinless we mean he never broke a command or disobeyed. But since sin is more than this, we can uphold the sinlessness of Christ (in traditional terms) and also hold to this interpretation of him being ‘made sin’ by participating in life unto death. We are ‘made sin’ by our involvement with the world. Jesus knew no sin during his life but was ‘made sin’ through involvement with the world and ultimately through his death. This is part of being human, and Christ was fully human. There came a point where he failed to reflect the image and glory of God.

“Forgiveness,” then, says Willmer, “is a change in the relations, circumstances and possibilities of sinners, including those ‘made sin,’ such that while the sin is truthfully recognised for what it is, it does not have the power to determine the future or final worth and being of the sinner.”⁸

Sin is not to be overlooked or treated in a frivolous way. The forgiven person will take responsibility for sin, not be freed from that responsibility. Forgiveness then means that the sinner and those who are ‘made sin’ are not left in that state and in despair. They are helped to find or create a different future. Willmer applies this to Christ – God did not leave him in his state of having been ‘made sin.’ So, using this definition of forgiveness given by Willmer it is certainly possible to see Christ as forgiven.

We must be careful not to misunderstand Willmer’s subtle and wider definition of sin and his use of the word forgiveness in relation to it. Forgiveness does not mean a letting go of charges against a person for committing a certain crime or wrongdoing. Instead, “the substance and manifestation of forgiveness is the fullness of a new and better life.”⁹ Forgiveness is then something for the future rather than something affecting the past – a new life, not just release from past guilt. This can apply to Christ. His being forgiven is his moving from his state of being ‘made sin’ to receiving a new and better life – not in terms of release from past guilt, because he knew no sin and never broke the law.

Willmer goes on to discuss how we are forgiven and made a new creation *in* Christ on this basis, but I must now leave further exploration to the reader.

forgiveness as a moral example

The cross of Christ is also taken another way – in terms of a moral example. Not only is Christ our moral example regarding forgiveness in his life, but he is also our example in his death. Conservative and evangelical Protestants have emphasised this alongside traditional interpretations. Liberal Protestants have tended to put this moral example

model of the cross more to the foreground. Either way this idea is also important for the current discussion regarding forgiveness. Christ is, on the cross as well as in his life, the embodiment of forgiveness and love.

Even for the more liberal approaches this is explicit in the Calvary scenes. Twice Jesus embodies a spirit of forgiveness and love. On one occasion this is explicit – he asks God to forgive the executioners. On the second occasion it is implicit in his comments to the thief about being with Jesus in paradise. So, Jesus is seen here putting into practice all that he had preached about forgiveness and love. His actions on the cross, as well as during his ministry, are performed so as to accompany his words and ultimately to provoke a response from humanity to love God in return, and to love and forgive their fellow human beings – just like Jesus – even if it means death.

Jesus taught about God's forgiveness and practised it in his own ministry and death. Even enemies were to be forgiven and the ultimate example of this on the cross was to be followed (1 Peter 2:21-25).

Schools of thought that put particular emphasis on such ideas are inclined to relegate traditional theories of the atonement. It seems that sometimes the argument given is that God, being sovereign, self-sufficient and in need of nothing outside of Himself, does not need any person or human action to persuade Him to forgive sins. Forgiveness is treated as if it were good in and of itself, requiring no justification. God is viewed then as being forgiving not because it was justified by an historical act but simply because it is good to forgive. As God forgives without condition we too should forgive, by way of following our prime example and because by doing so we necessarily perform an intrinsically good action. Forgiveness for the follower of Christ then becomes a community ethic rather than a metaphysical matter.

john wesley (1703-1791) – a personal struggle for forgiveness

After the reformation there was a period of stagnation in theology – systematising, defending, defining, attacking and drawing theological partitions between traditions. Many important themes became solely of academic concern, including forgiveness. Pietism was a reaction against this. Pietists believed love and forgiveness should be practiced amidst poor social conditions and not just carefully defined and confined to works of systematic theology and lecture rooms. Furthermore, it made little sense to the pietist to talk about the great forgiveness God offered the believer but to have no feeling or experience of it.

Experience has much to do with the Christian faith. When God forgives the sinner the sinner can, perhaps even should, be able to feel the forgiveness of God.

John Wesley's life seems to exemplify a great example of theology and experience in conversation – a conversation that was extremely tense, causing many a contradiction. Wesley struggled with the idea of forgiveness and its related concepts in a much more personal way than most theologians seem to.

For Wesley forgiveness of sins was something that occurred at conversion and was to be experienced. In Wesley's mind this experience of forgiveness of sins was tied to the assurance of salvation, which he believed should be perceptible. Wesley soon went through a period of doubt regarding his salvation and the forgiveness of his sins.

He came under the influence of Peter Bohler, a German Lutheran. Bohler convinced Wesley that his lack of assurance was a sign he was still an

unbeliever who had yet to experience the forgiveness of sins from God rather than simply being a weak-in-faith believer who had received forgiveness. This forgiveness is brought about by faith in God, and you either have this faith or you don't. There are no grey areas. True faith, Bohler stressed, brings forgiveness and salvation and these in turn lead to a perceptible assurance of that forgiveness and salvation. Bohler impressed on Wesley's mind the personal and experiential side of faith, trust and confidence in God - "through the merits of Christ *my* sins are forgiven and *I* am reconciled to the favour of God."¹⁰ This became linked to conversion. Conversion came to be viewed as the experience of both forgiveness and assurance springing up from faith, instantaneously.

Wesley finally had an experience that matched his theology in 1738, ". . . I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. . ."¹¹

However, he still had doubts. He went to visit a German Moravian community. The leader at the time, Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, taught Wesley that assurance might come after justification and forgiveness. So, Wesley's sins may have indeed been forgiven, but the assurance was still to come. This ran contrary to the teaching of Bohler that there had been no forgiveness unless there was an instant sensation of that forgiveness. The evidences of forgiveness, according to Bohler, were things such as peace and joy in complete fullness and an utter lack of fear and doubt. On the contrary, Zinzendorf taught that there might be peace and joy but maybe not and frequently not straight away. Such a view of salvation, forgiveness and its concurrent and subsequent effects on personal life matched better with Wesley's experience than the views of Bohler. Wesley also found it more scriptural.

So, faith, forgiveness and justification were separated from assurance in the mind of Wesley. Salvation and forgiveness were not to be viewed as a one-off event but were instead processes that began and then moved towards fullness, allowing for growth in piety and holy living. Moravians such as Peter Bohler had made a typically Lutheran mistake – justification and the consequences of justification became blurred. They had also made a pietistic error and so the forgiveness of sins was merged with the concept of being free from sin. The result of these theological blurs lead people to expect the Christian life to be one that exemplified sinless perfection and perfect attainment of the fruit of the Spirit. Such signs were taken as the evidence of perfection and without them there had been no forgiveness of sins or true conversion. In other words conversion and reaching sinless perfection were practically one and the same event. Once forgiven there followed an experience of assurance and a life of sinless perfection.

Wesley now had a theology matching his experience, but he was only beginning to expound the various nuances and subtleties of this theology of forgiveness, salvation and Christian growth. His constant doubts and questioning continued even though at his supposed conversion in 1738 he had said, "I received such a sense of the forgiveness of my sins as til then I never knew." Wesley's theology made room for Christians to have doubts despite being forgiven and justified. There was a spectrum of faith from weak to strong. Wesley was beginning to see that justification was not a mere one-off change during which the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the Christian and followed by perfection. Justification was something done for us by God – namely the forgiveness of sins. Sanctification was a work of God within the believer to move him or her towards perfection. Forgiveness was involved in both.

Such a theology was put into practice in the religious societies that Wesley set up and ran. The groups were for the purpose of nurturing and helping people grow in faith and grace in the context of Christian fellowship. For these Wesleyan societies forgiveness was to be a regular practice. There was mutual confession and prayer for the forgiveness of sins. Sins occurred daily and Christians were not yet perfect; they had to grow in grace and needed the forgiveness of sins daily – not as one-off event.

dietrich bonhoeffer (1906-1945) – the cost of forgiveness

Sometimes Christians may lapse into cheap forgiveness that helps them feel better or think better about themselves and cope better with a bad situation rather than engage in the struggle to change patterns of relationship. At the other extreme lies a view that says forgiveness is ineffective or even immoral. Given the depth of human sin there cannot be any forgiveness. To take the example of the Nazi situation, the proponent of the first extreme might say, “forgive, forget and move on,” while the proponent of the other extreme rules out forgiveness and simply responds “eye for eye.” Bonhoeffer’s struggle was between these two extremes. Unfortunately I have space only to outline his rejection of cheap grace.

Bonhoeffer believed that the “Kingdom of God” was important for theology and that to pray “thy Kingdom come” was to ask God to change the world and reveal His glory in it. This Kingdom should be embodied not just by individuals but by the Christian community. Building on this theme Bonhoeffer stressed how essential forgiveness was for the Christian: “. . . the Kingdom of God assumes form in the church insofar as loneliness is overcome through the ‘miracle’ of confession and forgiveness.”¹² He argued that the church is the communion of saints and as such the members need to bear the guilt of one another. This, he believed, overcomes loneliness, creates community and builds the Kingdom. Forgiveness opens up this possibility of a new congregation of the Kingdom.

Bonhoeffer focused greatly on the relation between Christ, the church and the world. In his discussions in this context he saw Christian forgiveness as central. He saw Christ as the one who forgives, by virtue of who he is and what he does. Christ’s work frees us from sin and makes new life possible. Christ also presents himself to the community of believers and brings both judgement and forgiveness.

Bonhoeffer soon developed the notion of Christians living in community to develop discipleship for the purpose of serving in the world. Bonhoeffer held that unless Christians lived a common life in Christ in which there were practices of forgiveness, reconciliation and certain devotional practices, the Christian church could not give a credible witness to the world. The practices of forgiving, and developing holiness help the Christian overcome sinful habits. “Bonhoeffer understood that forgiveness is a craft that must be learned and embodied over time as people seek to become holy in communion with God and one another.”¹³

So, Bonhoeffer was against the view that the Christian life was private and inner, a view that ended up trivialising forgiveness. Bonhoeffer labelled this position as “cheap grace” which according to Bonhoeffer emphasises “the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession.”¹⁴ Those who worked on the premise of cheap grace considered forgiveness of sins to be a general truth of doctrine, accomplished by a simple attendance at church. But on this view forgiveness does not deliver from sin – it justifies sin and simply tries to

make people feel better about it rather than actually change their lives in terms of dying to sin and then rising in Christ to newness of life.

Instead Bonhoeffer stressed the idea of costly forgiveness. As part of this theological project he emphasised themes of judgement, repentance, confession and love for enemies – practices required if someone wishes to learn and practice forgiveness.

Bonhoeffer believed that without judgement there was no grace. It is not possible even for God to either brush sin aside or simply forget about it. Sin must be faced and judged. Sin should be condemned, but after this the sinner should rise as a new person. Christ is the judge – but the judgement he brings in turn brings salvation rather than condemnation. Only by being judged by Christ can sin be forgiven. The judgement goes hand in hand with forgiveness, reconciliation and a new life for the sinner. His judgement, then, is an act of grace.

In order for forgiveness and reconciliation to follow, there must be repentance, not a justification of sin. Repentance, according to Bonhoeffer, involves recognising God's mercy toward oneself, and only in so doing will a person be able to forgive another. Neither forgiveness nor repentance is an attitude or feeling but rather things to be practiced and embodied in the community. They are also intimately connected: "the one who is ready to repent finds forgiveness. Penitence and forgiveness are so closely tied that one can reverse the principle: only he who is forgiven finds his way to penitence."¹⁵ The goal of forgiveness and repentance is to bring people into community and these practices are to continue once people are in community.

Confession is also a core component here and is to be part of this community life. It is central to Bonhoeffer's scheme for forgiveness of sin and subsequent new life. Bonhoeffer saw confession as communal - to each other as well as to God. His argument focused on last judgement, where every secret sin will be confessed openly. Confession to a fellow believer who also experiences the forgiveness of Christ removes the threat of the final judgement. He also made a link here with Christian assurance. He argued that we can only truly know we are forgiven if we have confessed the sin to a fellow believer. Confession can also help to remove pride - the great sin - and this can be an important move toward repentance and forgiveness.

Repentance and confession are then to be disciplines followed in precise and definite ways. They form a part of the larger practice of forgiveness, which for Bonhoeffer cannot be unconditional. For Bonhoeffer the preaching of forgiveness is safeguarded from becoming labelled and treated as cheap by the preaching of repentance. Preaching forgiveness when sin is not treated seriously and repentance is played down or ignored is to mistreat the gospel message and damage the credibility of the church.

Bonhoeffer then advocated this costly forgiveness against 'cheap grace.' How he saw forgiveness functioning on a practical level in face of the Nazi regime is a question that must be left with the reader to explore.¹⁶

conclusion

It almost seems wrong to have a conclusion to a paper dealing with forgiveness and the atonement in the Protestant tradition. The discussions in the area itself are far from reaching a state of conclusion, and most definitely never will.

We can however mention a few things that follow from the above discussion which should be highlighted.

For one thing we can notice that there are a number of models outlining the place of forgiveness in theories of the atonement and this is in part due to the plurality and richness of the concepts of forgiveness and atonement – a fact that cannot be ignored. No single theory or model can possibly incorporate everything of the richness of these terms and ideas. The fact that someone disagrees with our model, or simply has a different model, is not sufficient grounds on which to declare them heretical, sub-Christian, mislead or lacking in spirituality or intelligence.

We must also be careful to realise that forgiveness is something intensely personal, experiential and practical, not just a matter of theological reflection and speculation. We should avoid primarily focusing on the issues as a means of drawing up our denominational boundaries, divisions and distinctiveness from other groups. These are concepts with greater practical implications than that. To confine them to text books, confessions of faith or denominational lecture halls is a great disservice to both God and the community in which we find ourselves living, serving and called to reflect the example of Christ. Part of our responsibility is to struggle with these ideas practically as well as intellectually, to think about them well and to live them well.

The conclusion to any work about forgiveness is never a word. There is no such thing as the last word on forgiveness. The conclusion to forgiveness is to live it daily in our own situation.

notes

¹E.P. Sanders quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997) p.403.

²Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol.2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1981) p.488.

³Robin Collins quoted in Joel B. Green & Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2000) p.148.

⁴The essay is called “Jesus Christ the Forgiven: Christology, Atonement & Forgiveness.” It appears in a collection edited by Alistair McFadyen & Marcel Sarot, *Forgiveness and Truth: Explorations in Contemporary Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001) pp.15-29. I have here presented what amounts to a virtual paraphrase of Willmer’s argument. It is certainly no substitute for the essay itself and I strongly recommend it to the reader to read in full.

⁵Ibid. p.15.

⁶Ibid. pp.19-20.

⁷Ibid. p.19.

⁸Ibid. p.26.

⁹Ibid. p.27.

¹⁰Peter Bohler quoted in Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) pp.77-78.

¹¹Ibid. P.80.

¹²Dietrich Bonhoeffer quoted in Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995) pp.10.

¹³Ibid. pp.13.

¹⁴Ibid. pp.13.

¹⁵Ibid. pp.16

¹⁶I refer the reader to the first chapter of Jones’ book on which much of this section is based, for further information. See Recommended Reading.

recommended reading

L Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 1995).

Alister McFadyen & Marcel Sarot (eds), *Forgiveness and Truth: Explorations in Contemporary Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

Joel B. Green & Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2000).

websites

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www.forgivenessday.org

www.forgivenessweb.org

www.forgiveness-institute.org

website.lineone.net/~andrewhdknock/index.html

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Forgiveness in Literature and Popular Culture

Concluding Reflections

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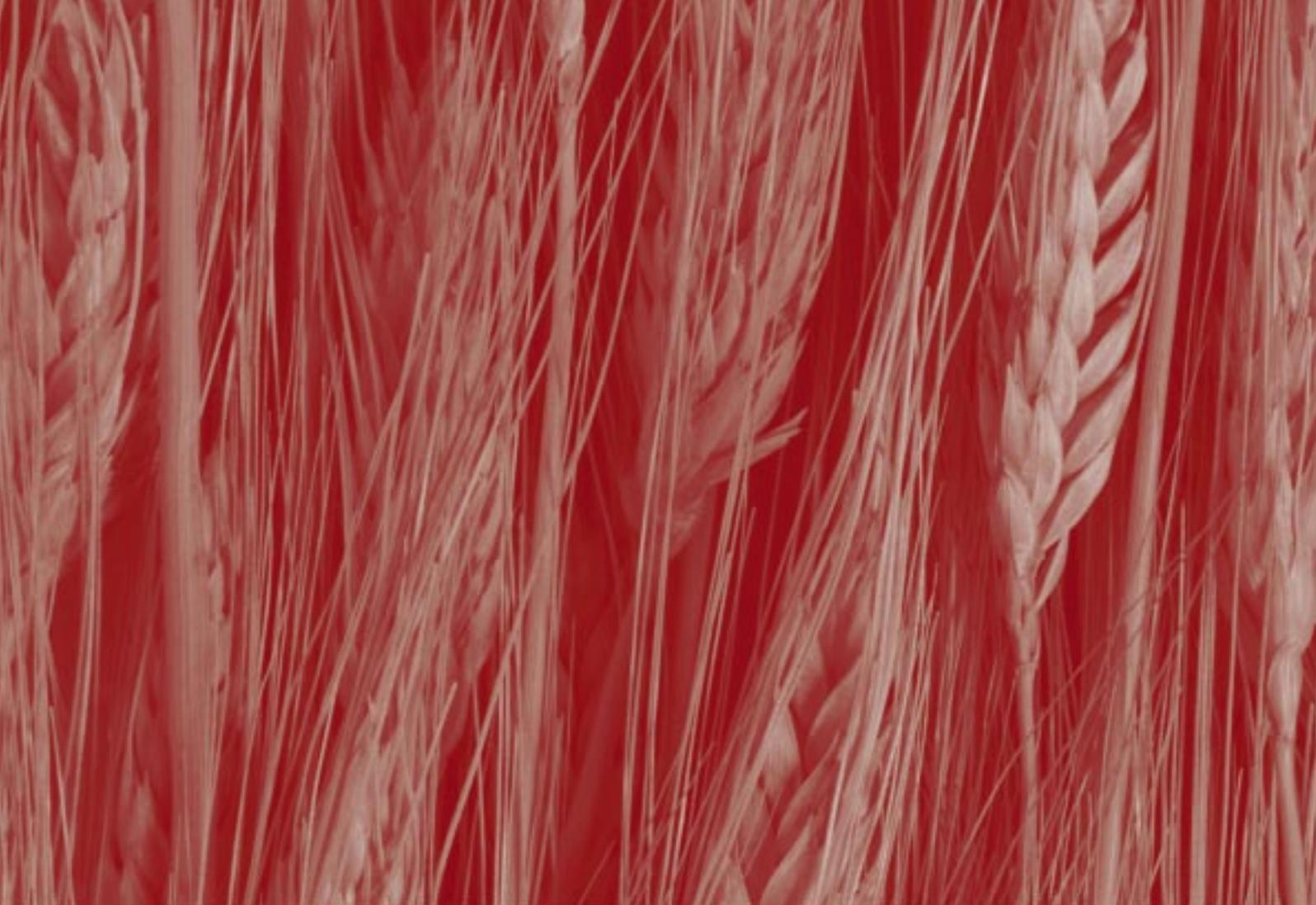
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