



10 forgiveness

forgiveness, guilt and repentance
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introducing the series

This paper is the tenth 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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to forgive or not to forgive

In Enniskillen on 8th November 1987 an IRA bomb killed Gordon Wilson's daughter, Marie. In an interview Gordon Wilson said, "I bear no ill will, I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life. She was a great wee lassie. . . She's dead. She's in Heaven, and we'll meet again."¹

Some met Wilson's forgiving attitude with coolness. Free Presbyterian minister Ian Paisley was one voice seeking to give theological 'correction' to Wilson's sentiments. Paisley commented, "When Mr Wilson says he has forgiven the murderer. . . he cannot, *he cannot* forgive. . . There is absolutely no forgiveness, none whatsoever without repentance."² Paisley later added, "The Lord Jesus Christ has made it crystal clear that forgiveness can only be given to those who repent. . . There is no forgiveness nor offer of forgiveness to the unrepenting man."³

unpacking repentance, guilt and forgiveness

Repentance is a translation of the Greek word *metanoia*. 'Meta' means to 'change.' 'Noia' refers to the mind. *Metanoia* carries the idea, then, of changing one's mind. The Old Testament idea of repentance provides the background for *metanoia*. Here the idea involves turning – *away from* sin and *towards* God, vowing to make every effort to obey.⁴ The New Testament authors use *metanoia* in this much wider sense.

Repentance includes three elements – intellectual, emotional and volitional. The intellectual element involves a change in thought and an act of moral conscience – recognition of sin, acceptance of guilt, and a realisation of the sin's consequences. The emotional element includes a change of feelings. Contrary to the proverb that says, "Sinning is the best part of repentance," we feel genuinely sorrowful and remorseful for our sin and our failure to meet moral standards. The volitional element is a change of orientation. We turn away from the sin in question, having the resolve and commitment to avoid it in the future. We consciously decide not to sin. It follows that repentance also entails confessing the sin to God, asking both for forgiveness for the sin and for the grace to avoid it.

Confession of sins has been incorporated widely into church life, usually accompanied with a message of assurance that God has forgiven us. It is worth stressing that while repentance involves confession, the two cannot be equated. Confession of guilt and acknowledgment of our need for forgiveness are not full repentance. Repentance, as I have mentioned, also includes a radical reorientation of one's life away from sin and towards God. No one ever achieves full repentance. Yet we can still confess individual sins and so be forgiven for them. The confessing of guilt and sin to God in humble submission will bring divine forgiveness for sins – even in the absence of full repentance. If it did not, then no one could be forgiven, for no one can fully repent.

We should also distinguish between repentance and apology. These different concepts are often confused. An apology, in common parlance, has to do with saying 'sorry' for something. It is often a mere matter of a few spoken words. Words are easy to utter if by uttering them one stands to gain. Even when a genuine apology is uttered it does not amount to repentance, which is a much fuller concept.

Guilt is the state of a person who has committed some wrongful act – a sin or a crime.⁵ Guilt cannot be removed. It is related to the past, which cannot be changed. A person may serve time for murder, but once released the person does not cease being guilty. People are guilty by

virtue of the evil they have done and cannot undo. In scriptural terms we are *all* guilty. We were created by God and are required to be obedient to His commands. Everybody without exception has failed, and thus sinned. Everybody is therefore guilty in the eyes of God. The forgiveness that God bestows on the guilty involves pardon for sin and release for a better future. The guilty person is set free from the due punishment. We remain guilty, but are treated as if we are not.

Part of the act of repentance is the *acceptance* of such guilt. The acceptance of guilt is not the same as an acceptance of responsibility. Guilt includes the idea that what we did was wrong. When a murderer admits to killing someone, this is not necessarily an admission of *guilt*. The murderer may not consider the killing to be wrong.

Compared to forgiveness, though, guilt is not as important for the New Testament authors. The message of forgiveness is central to Christianity.

Before progressing I should say a little about the difficulties of interpersonal forgiveness. Talking about forgiveness is easier than forgiving. Most of us have probably never had something terrible inflicted on us by someone else. We tend to have more to be forgiven for than we have to forgive. I wonder how easily I could forgive if my family were murdered. How some people ever find it in their hearts to forgive certain things is difficult to comprehend. Is forgiveness even possible? I sometimes can't comprehend how it is, but I suspect Christ might disagree. We must remember that those who have been gravely hurt are the best people to talk about forgiveness – a man who has been crucified perhaps?

Jesus requires us not only to “love your enemies” but also to “pray for those who persecute you.” We could be misled into thinking this was easy to do. When we reflect on what this means we should be struck by the enormity of it. Loving enemies – actually positively wishing good on them – is difficult and, like so many things in the Christian life, is a journey. Going from a point of not loving, even positively hating, enemies, to a point of loving them is not like flicking a switch. It is more akin to walking up a mountain. It may take some time before we can even pray for them. This is normal and understandable. A willingness to begin walking this path, even a mere willingness to desire to begin walking this path, is a good and healthy step and sometimes all that can be done. C.S. Lewis is correct to state that everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive. Contrary to certain opinions, forgiveness is not weakness or willing acceptance of abuse. It is much easier to let things fester and lash out in vengeance. Such is the way of human nature. Forgiveness is more creative than vengeance, requiring much more strength and courage. It requires strength to avoid the natural vengeful reaction, and courage to open oneself up to further hurt. It seems that we must hold two things in tension – the difficulty of forgiveness alongside the call to forgive, our task being to find forgiveness in even the most unlikely of contexts.

no forgiveness for the unrepentant brother?

Can we forgive those who sin against us even without repentance?
Should we forgive only those who repent?

A chief text used by proponents of the view that it is wrong to forgive without repentance is Luke 17:3-4:

“. . . If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”

I fail to see how these verses can be used to argue that it is wrong to forgive without repentance. Jesus simply does not say this. Nowhere does Jesus say, “If your brother does *not* repent you are wrong to forgive him.” To use these verses in this way is patently illogical. We cannot make such a negative inference from a positive statement.⁶ Jesus is simply silent regarding how we treat an unrepentant person. Two similar but very different concepts are often confused here – ‘if’ and ‘only if.’ These phrases look identical, but they are very different. If Jesus had said, “If *and only if* your brother repents forgive him,” then the case would be clear. But Jesus didn’t say that. He said “if,” and this does not rule out that we *can* forgive someone who doesn’t repent.⁷

In Luke 17:3-4, the brother who sins does so seven times and comes back each time saying, “I repent.” In this instance Jesus mentions only words spoken. He is therefore not saying much about repentance at all, instead focusing more on the unlimited forgiveness of one brother towards another. Forgiveness, not repentance, is the theme.

Other segments of the gospel narrative clarify the relationship between forgiveness and repentance even further. One noteworthy episode is the crucifixion, during which Christ prays, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” There is no mention of repentance on behalf of the executioners, who carried out the crucifixion to the end. It seems reasonable to believe there was no repentance. Jesus was not, therefore, appealing to God as a consequence of an act of repentance by his executioners. In fact, this point could be expanded even further. The central thrust of orthodox Christian teaching on the atonement is on God taking the initiative in human salvation. God reaches out with his offer of forgiveness to a sinful humanity. This then draws our response afterwards. We do not make the first move by repenting. Forgiveness is an act of grace, and grace, by definition, is unconditional. If it had conditions then it would cease to be an act of grace and become an act of merit.

Furthermore, in the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:12 we read, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Then in 6:14-15, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” Again we find no mention of repentance. Now, admittedly the mere absence of mention of repentance does not itself prove that repentance is not required. However, the prayer does suggest that our attitude of forgiveness, our willingness to forgive and offer forgiveness, should be akin to God’s attitude. Like God we should take the initiative and extend forgiveness. We should strive to live a life marked by such a forgiving spirit. God is a forgiving God. Those who receive God’s forgiveness and call Him “Father” should display something of his character and adopt a forgiving spirit in relation to others. It does not seem possible that a person could intentionally say the Lord’s Prayer while conscious that they had an unforgiving attitude towards someone. The wording of the text implies that the disciple uttering the words has already forgiven his or her fellow humans for their sins against them. Without this it would seem impossible to ask God for forgiveness honestly and without hypocrisy.

A prime example of forgiveness in action is in Stephen’s response to his executioners. After a long speech to the Sanhedrin, Stephen was stoned. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” These people were not repentant. Saul gave his approval to the death and a great persecution broke out against the church. The people involved in the stoning were not repentant when Stephen adopted his forgiving attitude towards them. They accepted no guilt, showed no remorse, and failed to desist from the sinful actions.

Another classic moment is the dialogue between Jesus and Peter in Matthew 18:21-22. Peter asks Jesus, “Lord how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?” Perhaps in an attempt to impress Jesus, Peter adds, “As many as seven times,” when perhaps the other disciples were thinking, “one, two, certainly no more than three.” Jesus’ reply puts Peter’s suggestion firmly in perspective, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.” What Jesus means is that we should go on forgiving, counting not the number of times. We should not entertain the notion that there is a limit beyond which a person cannot be forgiven. Interestingly there is no mention here of whether or not the sinner has repented. Jesus is simply telling his followers to keep on forgiving, to live a forgiving life. Gregory Jones has argued that forgiveness is a way of life, rather than a mere moment of uttering a word. This notion is certainly consistent with what Jesus is getting at here.

It certainly seems difficult therefore to build a biblical case that a Christian should only forgive those who repent.

my need to repent, my need for forgiveness

When Jesus mentioned forgiveness, it was normally regarding our own need of forgiveness. In the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18, Jesus implies that when there is a call for us to forgive then we should remember our own need for and experience of forgiveness.

Earlier Jesus had said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye. . . You hypocrites!”⁸ Jesus here warns of self-righteous judgement and faultfinding in others. When dealing with forgiveness and repentance, our primary focus is our *own* repentance and forgiveness for our *own* sins. Our main concern should not be, “How can I forgive all those terrible people for the terrible things they have done to me and to others?”

If we come to repentance with primarily the repentance of *others* in mind, then we miss the point of the gospel message. Thinking in a neat dichotomy, tarring others as sin-filled criminals and ourselves as pure spotless lambs or innocent victims, should be avoided. There is no such thing as an innocent victim in either moral or theological terms. In Christianity there is only one innocent victim. The name of that victim is not Me. Cycles of violence, hatred, and bitterness spring from a mindset that constantly sees the need for repentance in others, yet is blind to the need of forgiveness for self. We should avoid looking in condemnation at the sins of others – people we consider worse than us. Brian Bill puts it well: “We have very little tolerance for people who sin differently than we do.”

Caution must be taken to ensure that our calls for repentance before we offer forgiveness are not just a cover for a general unwillingness to begin walking the path of forgiveness. One victim of the troubles in Northern Ireland said of those who killed her husband, “I can only say that I hate them. . . I have to think of them as pure evil. . . [it is] something I can’t forgive. I could never forgive them. Maybe if they were truly sorry and showed it – but even then I just don’t know.” Victims are completely entitled to this anger. It is part of the natural healing that should take place after such a trauma. This particular woman was honest in admitting that even if there were some sign of repentance, she still doesn’t know if she could forgive. Although, the fact that she confesses to these feelings signifies that perhaps the process of forgiveness is underway. Forgiveness involves an acknowledgement of the depth of suffering caused. All of the natural, yet negative, feelings like rage or hatred should be admitted

and faced. These feelings are both understandable and excusable. In fact they reflect a person's values about issues like justice, respect and human dignity.

However, it must be understood that nobody is without fault, blame or guilt⁹ – certainly not in the eyes of God. Everyone needs God's forgiveness. We must ensure that our failure to begin the process of forgiveness without repentance is not the result of an inability to see fault in ourselves, only in others. Is our unwillingness to forgive illustrative of an inner attitude that we ourselves do not need forgiveness? Once we are aware of our own faults and our own need of forgiveness, it will become easier (not easy) to extend forgiveness to others. Richard Holloway puts it like this: "We must remember that we all at some time stand in need of being forgiven and that those who refuse forgiveness may be destroying the bridge that one day they may themselves have to cross."¹⁰

Volf suggests that acknowledging all the negative feelings in prayer to God, can aid the process of forgiving. He writes, "forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners." By bringing our feelings before God we are helped to forgive others because, "no one can be in the presence of [God]. . . for long without. . . transposing the enemy from the sphere of monstrous inhumanity into the sphere of shared humanity and herself from the sphere of proud innocence into the sphere of common sinfulness."¹¹

the inadequacy of repentance

Another problem with making repentance a condition for forgiveness is that repentance is rarely adequate. If someone sins against us we often want more than repentance. Demands for repentance might be the first in a series of deeper demands.

Human beings can often incline towards hatred and bitterness and its justification. Often our beliefs and desires are firmly decided before we then engage in a process of using rational and moral arguments to justify ourselves, with the pretence that we arrived at our conclusions after rational and ethical enquiry. The truth is that we often use such tools to justify that which we already believe, think and do. It is easy to justify one's feelings – whether those are of hatred and bitterness or of love and concern. Is our language of rationality simply window dressing on a deep-seated inner prejudice? How often is "no repentance" a cover for "I just do not want to forgive"?

By making repentance a condition for forgiveness we risk creating a never-ending spiral in which forgiveness is never offered because our demands and conditions are never met. Just what is it that we desire from the other party? It would be easy to draw up a detailed inventory of requirements by which to judge if someone has adequately repented. Moreover, we could add to this inventory. People might never achieve our targets.

Repentance involves a change of heart. What are the telling signs? It could be argued that the signs will become clear over time and we will see them soon enough. But how long must we wait? Forgiveness could be deferred again and again with the line, "Well, let's just wait and see."

Rabbi David Blumenthal argued that repentance (*teshuva*) involves not only accepting sin and guilt and being remorseful for it, but also restitution – a form of repayment for wrongs done. Victims are compensated for the sins against them. It would be an act by the guilty party of making good,

as well as possible, for the damage done. This is intended to be an indicator of genuine repentance. Melancthon hinted at something similar when he said repentance consists of “contrition, that is, terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin. . . [and] faith. . . from which good works, which are the fruits of repentance, are bound to follow.” Again this notion is problematic. What works should be done? When have enough of these works been done? This may seem easy on certain occasions – for instance if a person steals another person’s car, then they give back in equal value. But even this is difficult to measure, for the victim could claim to have lost more than their car through the inconvenience of theft. Restitution is indeed something for the guilty party to consider, but to demand it as a sign of genuine repentance before we forgive is problematic. It is still easy for us to keep adding demands.

Moreover, the motivation to repent may not be pure. La Rochefoucauld commented, “Our repentance is not so much regret for the evil we have done as fear of what might happen to us because of it.” A person may indeed repent for a sin but not out of sorrow and remorse for the evil act and its consequences. Perhaps the person in question repents through fear of punishment. Such repentance would be self-seeking. Arguably it is not genuine repentance at all. The person is not remorseful for their actions. They simply feel more sorry for themselves than anything. This adds to the dilemma of making repentance a condition of forgiveness.

It certainly seems that human beings are simply not in a position to judge when genuine repentance is under way. When a person says, “I repent,” we can easily retort, “I do not believe you,” or, “too little, too late.” When a person shows signs of repentance, we can easily dismiss them as selfish attempts by the person to look good and improve their status. As for feelings of repentance, we cannot detect them. Nobody truly knows the heart and mind of another person. How then can we judge when a person has begun to genuinely repent? Whilst there is no agreement on how to judge repentance we had best not make it a condition of anything. God alone, who truly knows the hearts and minds of all people, can tell whether repentance is genuine. If repentance is a condition of forgiveness, then it could only possibly be so with God. Only God can judge if there is genuine repentance or not.

In addition, it takes time for people to forgive others. C.S. Lewis once remarked that it took him 30 years to forgive another person. Forgiveness can rarely happen overnight. It is often a struggle, a process over time. Likewise, repentance is rarely a one-off event that occurs in an instant. It too is a struggle and a process. We often fail to recognise this. We might even adopt a double standard. If we seek a change in another person, if we want them to truly repent, we tend to want it instantaneously. However, when dealing with our own change and our own repentance we have a much more long-term strategy. We generally have more patience with ourselves than with others. For genuine repentance – acknowledgement of sin and guilt, confession, turning from the sin, and positive change in terms of a reorientation of some part of our life – we all need time. We need to look out for small signals of repentance, encourage them and positively respond to them.

However, signs of repentance can aid the onset of forgiveness. When an offender expresses remorse for some wrong and seems to show “fruits of repentance,” it can help the victim to engage in forgiveness. By engaging in repentance the guilty party signals a change of identity from the person who committed the crime. If this new person in the making were to go back in time, they would not now commit the offence. Repentance can then be a great help to victims. It doesn’t buy their forgiveness, nor does it compensate for damages, however, repentance can be a tangible expres-

sion towards the victim that helps them to forgive. Repentance can affirm the worth and significance of the victim as a person. It can be an act of honouring the victim as opposed to an act of using the victim as a means to some sinful end. Yet forgiveness remains something freely given. It is an act of generosity, even gratuitously so. If the offender, through the process of repentance, accepts forgiveness, it can help release them from the burden of guilt. Yet, to make repentance a condition of forgiveness comes close to making forgiveness something that is deserved, owed to the offender, or bought with repentance.¹²

for they know not what they do

Understanding a person, as well as their culture, history and upbringing, can help us to forgive them, even when they do not repent but instead consider their actions to be good, right and justified.

Repentance involves acknowledging guilt. Inherent in the idea of guilt is the notion of personal responsibility. Within this notion of personal responsibility is the concept that we are free to choose our actions. We were able to have acted differently than we actually did. I do not intend to challenge this idea, since there can be little talk of morality without it. Instead I would like to point out that this is not the whole truth – there is a bigger picture.

The crucifixion scene will help here. The executioners knew what they were doing and carry responsibility for their actions. It is, however, interesting to note the words of Christ, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” In traditional orthodox Christianity we are taught that we are all guilty of the death of Christ. Jesus’ prayer is perhaps a request for forgiveness for every person. More importantly, what Jesus is recognising is that nobody is fully in charge of their lives. We are not the rational, wholly autonomous agents that modern individualism would have us believe. Many things over which we have little or no control have helped shape us into who we are. We have some control over ourselves but not full control. This is most stark when we look at whole communities caught up in some historical conflict. If as a child you were brought up in a Palestinian home, hearing about the abuses of Palestinians by Israelis, witnessing Israelis shooting your neighbours, and listening to stories of Palestinian heroes and the right to the land, then is it not more than possible that you would grow up to be what the West calls a terrorist? Although such a person is responsible for their actions, they have also largely been made by factors outside of their control.

Childhood years are incredibly important in shaping the person we will later be. For the most part, such years are beyond our control. Thus, the human situation is much more complex than it seems *prima facie*. We are indeed ultimately responsible and we do have real choices, but we must also recognise that the lives and actions of others have influenced us and helped to create who we are. In the Northern Irish situation most of us have never pulled a trigger, but many of us will have in some way contributed to a culture of sectarianism that shaped the hearts and minds of those who did.¹³ Freedom is never unqualified or absolute. We each have varying degrees of freedom; some have more than others.

This perhaps explains the mixture of anger and love we find in Jesus. He challenged sins, abuse, and cruelty but also had a deep love for sinners. Jesus’ anger was more often levelled at people who were self-righteous and unwilling to admit to any fault, than at those who were aware of the state of their lives. Jesus got angry when he saw those in need of forgiveness deny their need of it with blindness to their state.

forgiveness bringing healing and repentance

Forgiveness, and the lack of it, has consequences for both victim and offender. Suffering hurt inflicted by others can have a strong impact on the victim's psychological well-being. Victims can feel debasement, even guilt. This can cause depression, even suicidal tendencies. The victim suffers a loss of freedom, involuntarily taken over by fear, worry, anger, hatred and bitterness – feelings that penetrate to the core of the person, forming a significant influence in their life. Victims frequently direct such feelings at themselves, engaging in self-loathing or blame. So, the offence and the offender have a power over the victim's life.

Forgiving can bring freedom from this power. It involves letting go of the power, refusing to let it dominate. Without this there can be nothing but a festering wound that threatens to engulf the person's being and determine their future in a negative way. Forgiveness counters this to empower the victim and help restore wholeness. It changes a person from being a victim to being a survivor. Muller-Fahrenheit writes how forgiveness has the power to "free the future from the haunting legacies of the past."¹⁴

Carolyn Holderread Heggen, a Christian psychotherapist and specialist on sexual abuse, writes about how forgiveness benefits the victims of sexual abuse. She argues, quite correctly, that forgiveness is not saying that the crime was OK and all is well. It simply isn't well. Heggen views forgiveness as a process, at least one purpose of which is to benefit the victim. The process of forgiveness helps the victim to release emotional pain and in its place have some inner resolution and peace. Forgiveness then, Heggen believes, helps to free the victim from the grip that the sin and the perpetrator still has on them. Forgiveness involves an acknowledgement of the victim's right to anger and resentment but also the need to be freed from what will ultimately be destructive emotion. Lewis Smedes agrees, adding that if we deny the possibility of a person being forgiven, we deny the victim the possibility of being healed through forgiveness.

There are consequences too for the guilty person who doesn't find a way to forgiveness. The person may wrestle with their guilt, possibly in very negative ways. They could attempt to deny responsibility. Perhaps the crime could be ignored. Even worse, the guilty party may attempt to justify the offence. Maybe the victim actually deserved what happened. Such responses can make the guilty party worse. Deep down the person knows what they have done. By refusing to acknowledge the guilt, the person simply digs in deeper using whatever ruse was used to deny the guilt. The offender might even have feelings of spite and resentment against the victim, with the possibility of further wrongdoings. It is not easy for a wrongdoer to be pleasant to the one he or she has wronged without the wrongdoer admitting guilt. Instead the wrongdoer continues in actions of hate and mistreatment because there is no way for him or her to deal with the guilt in more constructive ways.

A story is reported of a woman who wished to see the murderer of her daughter while he was on death row. She went to the prison with a burning hatred. On her very first visit she found herself filled with pity and forgiveness for the murderer and she felt a burden lift from her. She no longer wanted the man to die. After several visits the man broke down, admitting his guilt and asking for forgiveness, even though it had already been given. It is noteworthy that in this case forgiveness opened the way for repentance. Forgiveness helped to remove the man's barriers, aiding him in seeing the gravity of his crime more clearly than a death sentence did. Without forgiveness this man may never have repented. Forgiveness in cases like this one opened the door for repentance and led to a process of reconciliation and renewal of relationship.

This is consistent with the teaching of Christ. In the parable of the Prodigal Son it is significant that the father runs to and reaches out to his son in loving acceptance and forgiveness before the son has any chance to give his repentance speech. Only afterwards are the words of repentance given, but the father did not wait for its expression.

the call to repent

Although forgiveness is not conditional on repentance, the need for repentance remains. We are called to live lives of forgiveness, but also to live lives of repentance. Forgiveness does not remove the need for repentance.

In believing the Kingdom was near, John the Baptist expected that judgement was imminent and thus called all people to prepare by repenting. Only the repentant would receive the forgiveness that was offered; others would face the coming wrath.

The theme of repentance is also high on Christ's agenda, and that of the disciples he commissioned. Jesus calls all who would take part in his Kingdom to change, radical renunciation and transformation of character. His call is also universal in scope. Jesus wants people to repent, to turn from a sinful life. This includes turning from all obvious sins as well as all attitudes that hinder a person's relationship with God and which would have drastic consequences if not dealt with through repentance. For Jesus this is absolutely imperative.

Jesus' message resonates with the theme of repentance. For instance, on several occasions he directs comments to the wealthy who rely on wealth rather than on God. For those who seek to live life aside from trusting in God, relying instead on money and possessions, Jesus has what is in effect a message of repentance – turn, let go of these crutches and hindrances to relationship with God, and trust in God instead.

Jesus also links his call for repentance to the closeness of the Kingdom. Yet, whereas John the Baptist focused on imminent judgement as the motivation for repentance, Jesus emphasises salvation and God's goodness. With the arrival of Jesus the Kingdom had, in a sense, arrived. Jesus' ministry revealed this Kingdom, with Jesus emphasising its salvific character. With Jesus came the power of the Kingdom to free people and grant salvation. Repentance is a demand, yet the divine initiative in salvation is stressed. Those who refuse to repent bring judgment on themselves; those who do repent will receive salvation.

Jesus' ministry testifies to the divine initiative of reaching out to people in their sinful state. He mixed with some of the most unsavoury characters, to the great distress of some people. However, Jesus was basically portraying his purpose – to seek and to save the lost and to heal the sick. There is no need for Jesus to have singled out such people except for their great need. Jesus reached out to such people in a display of free grace – meeting and helping a humanity that cannot help itself. Through taking the initiative and reaching out, Jesus moves people to repentance. Those who do not repent fail to see just how bankrupt they are. They shut themselves out of God's Kingdom. Those who do repent are "found." Repentance in the ministry of Jesus is then both a requirement and a proper response to the goodness of God in taking the initiative in reaching out to a sinful humanity in grace and forgiveness.

notes

¹Gordon Wilson, *Marie* (London: Collins, 1990), p.46.

²The Revivalist, December 1987, p.24.

³The Revivalist, March 1988, p.3.

⁴We also find reference to God turning from his anger (repenting) against Israel (Exodus 32:12). In 1 Kings 8:35ff we find Solomon praying to God that he will forgive his people when they turn from their sin. Throughout the Old Testament we find reference to people turning or not turning or being instructed to turn from sin and towards God. Such turning implies a trust in God and a commitment to obey (Jeremiah 15:7; Isaiah 59:20; Ezekiel 3:19; 13:22; 1 Kings 13:33; Hosea 6:1; Isaiah 10:21; Jeremiah 3:7 and Amos 4:6).

⁵It should be noted that crimes and sins are not the same thing. An act, such as murder may be both a crime and a sin but an act could also be a sin but not a crime or a crime but not a sin.

⁶Philosophers and logicians label the logical fallacy that appears in this case as the “Fallacy of Denying the Antecedent.” Its formal structure is as follows:

(1) *If P then Q*

(2) *Not P*

(3) *Therefore Not Q*

⁷This point can be made clearer. Suppose we were to say, “If it is raining then the ground would be wet.” Is it right to infer that since it is not raining then the ground will not be wet? No. The ground could be wet for other reasons – maybe someone hosed the ground, maybe it is wet because of snow. We cannot say the ground is not wet on the basis that it is not raining. All we can say is that if it is raining then the ground certainly will be wet. Likewise, we cannot say we should not forgive on the basis that there is no repentance. The most we can say is that if there *is* repentance then we must forgive.

⁸Matthew 7:1-5.

⁹We often think of sin or crime as *wrongdoings*. However, we can also be guilty of what I would call ‘*wrong-non-doings*’ – through inaction as well as action. If the consequences of inaction are the same as the consequences of some action then there is no real moral distinction. Inaction can also be a failure to fulfil some moral duty.

¹⁰Richard Holloway, *Doubts and Loves: What is Left of Christianity* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2002).

¹¹Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p.124.

¹²The point made in this section is even more acute when we consider whole communities. Here it is hard to know who is to do the forgiving and of what, and who is to do the repenting and of what. It is impossible to keep a check sheet of rights and wrongs and of who did what to whom, where, when and why, in situations of chronic historical conflict. This would be a hopeless task. Attempting it simply ensures that the conflict will continue. Forgiveness on the other hand can creatively break out of this cycle. Forgiveness at the political level is well documented in the history of South Africa, for instance.

¹³We all contribute in some way to a culture and to our society and so can be partly responsible even for things done by other people. For instance, a person may give a rather inflammatory political speech that could inspire another person to take up arms. The speaker may not have intended this, and is not directly involved; yet he or she must surely take some of the responsibility.

¹⁴G. Muller-Fahrenholz, *The Art of Forgiveness: Theological Reflections on Healing and Reconciliation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), p.5.

recommended reading

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

websites

www.forgiving.org
 www.forgivenessday.org
 www.forgivenessweb.org
 www.forgiveness-institute.org
 website.lineone.net/~andrewhdknock/index.html

forgiveness papers already available

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