



forgiveness

forgiveness and the individual
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introducing the series

This paper is the eleventh 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.

from innocence to experience: an exploration of the possibilities and limits of forgiveness between individuals

In the realm of human relationships none of us is innocent, though we often like to think we are. We have all been hurt by others and we have all sought to throw that pain back in retaliation, telling ourselves that it was 'all his or her fault' and that 'they' deserve to suffer in return. We feel angry (often justifiably) at whatever has been done to us and it seems only right to either 'get back' at the other person, 'giving as good as we got,' or to walk away from the relationship, depriving the other of our presence and protecting ourselves from further harm. 'They haven't spoken for years' or 'I'll never forgive them' are words not uncommonly heard in Northern Ireland, indicating that a relationship has become frozen in conflict at a certain point – a conflict which has never been resolved.

Does this matter? Is there any reason why we should fly in the face of our natural instincts and try to heal the hurt or offence between ourselves and others? And if there were such reason, how would we do it? When the hurt is deep, how can we stop it from turning into a bitter resentment and hatred which can come to damage us as much as, if not more than, the original offence? How do we let go of the will to vengeance and bitterness, the will to keep others permanently at a distance – indeed, is it right that we should? For where is justice in all of this, and the place of punishment? Does forgiveness not condone evil, weakly accepting the unacceptable? Are there not some offences so heinous that they should never be forgiven?

Discussion of these questions takes us to the core of the issues which lie at the heart of this paper. I will start by looking at the place of forgiveness in Christian theology and experience since, for Christians, this has to form the bedrock and model of our thinking and practice. I will then move on to look at some of the processes involved in forgiving, framing at least the beginnings of some answers to the questions posed in the last paragraph.

forgiveness, the gospel and the disciple

It is a truism to say that forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian gospel, though the path from theological conviction to everyday practice is not a smooth one. The gospel is about the mending of relationship between a sinful humanity and a holy God. Forgiveness is only one of the elements involved in that process, but it is a vital one. Choosing reconciliation, God needs to find a way to deal justly with the offence against him, a way to bridge the gulf between himself and those who have wronged him. He sets in motion a long-term plan to restore relationship, a plan which culminates in the highest cost imaginable: the death of his Son, who takes the punishment which others should have had. God thus works for the good of his enemies while they are still estranged, still going their own way. He sets up the conditions which make reconciliation possible, paying the price himself. His plan involves considerable risk and loss, not least in the incarnation of his Son who must accept the limitations and dangers of embodiment. But it is a supremely effective strategy, for becoming human brings God as close as he can possibly get to those he is trying to reach.

Of course, this offer of renewal of friendship will produce fruit only if the offenders face up to their wrongdoing and turn away from it, choosing to behave differently in the future; but a way has been opened up and the hand of friendship extended before any change is demanded. God has made the first move, accepting vulnerability. For there is no guarantee of success – further rejection may be in store. We see this in the parable of

Luke 15 where the Father throws aside his dignity and status as head of household by running to embrace his prodigal son even before he has had a chance to open his mouth to deliver his prepared speech of contrition. No standing on ceremony here, no hurt pride, no stance of embittered separation.

But what relevance does this have for human issues of hurt and forgiveness? It is one thing to acknowledge that God forgives, to stand awed at the price he was prepared to pay to win us back. But what of us? We are human, not divine, living in a fallen world which is deeply scarred and distorted by sin. No part of our lives, relationships, motivations or ambitions is immune from its effects. Even in good times, it is often hard for us to know our own minds, to plumb the depths of our motivations and desires. When strong feelings are involved, this difficulty is magnified. The pain we feel when serious hurt has been inflicted on us is profound; the desire to hit back, whether literally or metaphorically, almost overwhelming. And what we do with these feelings will have consequences both for ourselves and the other or others involved. Flinging our feelings outwards indiscriminately in retaliation may cause a lot of damage and escalate the situation. Yet, suppressing them carries the potential of seriously harming the self. Even when we choose to let them go, they tend to rise up to haunt us in memory – tripping us up when we least expect. Our sense of justice demands that our hurt be acknowledged and ‘perpetrators’ pay for what they have done to us, but in this fallen, magic-mirror world of distortion and evasion, it is often difficult to apportion blame fairly or work out due punishment. Sometimes, it’s impossible.

What are we to say, then? Is forgiveness just too hard in a fallen world? Does it belong only to the world of the divine? If so, then Jesus’ teaching on the subject makes no sense, for he seems to assume that this will be an integral part of the fabric of his followers’ lives, something normal and ongoing. When the subject is raised by Peter (who apparently thought that forgiving once or twice was above and beyond the call of duty) he tells his disciples to keep on forgiving each other pretty much *ad infinitum* (see Matthew 18:21-23). And when he teaches his followers how to pray, he assumes that the forgiveness they have received from God will express itself in forgiving others, teaching which is reinforced in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23-35.

Jesus thus connects the worlds of the human and the divine: because God chooses to forgive, his followers are to make this choice also; because it is within God’s nature to forgive, it is to become part of his followers’ natures too. We are to show the family likeness, becoming increasingly like the One we worship (Leviticus 19:2). Yet, put starkly like this, Jesus’ call to forgiveness can sound like a burden, an impossible demand which can leave us with a permanent sense of frustration and failure – unless we see the wider context of God’s graceful Kingdom and the redemptive community of relationships which he calls us to. For we were never meant to do this on our own; God’s vision has always been for a redeemed people – not a group of isolated individuals, each preoccupied with his or her own spiritual life. Why does Jesus see forgiveness as integral to the lives of his followers? Because renewed, redeemed relationships are central to the gospel and the Kingdom of God – they lie at the heart of who God is and what God is about. He himself has always been part of a community, an eternal communion of three distinct persons who live in a harmony of different but joined-together notes. Created in God’s image, we too were made for friendship and communion – with ourselves, with others and with the God who made us. We were created to share in the life of this three-in-one God, made for relationship, which is why we hurt so much when we are isolated or estranged from others.

It is to such communion that God in his grace is calling us back. His vision is to re-make and restore us – to himself and to one another. His kingdom operates by different values to those of the world. Here, the mending of relationships is a priority because this is part of the restoring of communion – hence the importance of forgiveness. Here, grace provides the backdrop against which Jesus' followers learn to be more like him, while acknowledging that things will never be complete or made perfect till the Kingdom comes fully with his return. So we learn to live here in the tension of the 'now and not yet' of God's Kingdom – seeing signs and evidences of redemption, but struggling still with the mess and limitation of this maimed and fractured world. In this context, Jesus' teaching on forgiveness makes sense. It is an integral part of our discipleship, part of the growing 'God-likeness' to which we are called. But it is also something that's hard, limited by the realities of living in a damaged world in which the Kingdom of God has not yet fully come. In this context, we move forward in hope, learning as we go, while acknowledging that in some situations only a very limited forgiveness will be possible.

This enables us to be realistic about the possibilities and limits of forgiveness: to hold the vision of restored relationships alongside the complexities and limitations imposed by our fallenness. It enables us to embrace an underlying orientation of movement towards those who have hurt us or whom we have hurt – an orientation which hopes and works for restoration (thus giving it possibility) but which is realistic about the obstacles that impede progress, both in ourselves and those with whom we seek reconciliation. Some of these obstacles may take years to overcome, others may prove insurmountable, while others may melt away with surprising ease – a testimony to the ongoing work of God's grace among us.

This kind of movement stands in stark contrast to the reflexive orientation of the world which wants retaliation, power over the opponent and perhaps even the opponent's destruction. This is natural to us, as is the frozen stance of 'I will never forgive.' Going God's way seems unnatural, a reversal of our normal instincts. So this revolution in the shape of our relationships with others (and ourselves, since we need to give ourselves this grace also) is something that takes time. Greg Jones, in his book *Embodying Forgiveness*, compares the learning that we need to do here with that of a craft; that is, we need to commit to learning the craft of forgiveness. As with any craft, this is a long-term process involving the unlearning of old habits alongside the practising of new ways of thinking and behaving. It will be a slow process, producing, at times, as much confusion as clarity – often we will not know if we're getting it right. So we will need the encouragement of others: people to support and pray for us; people to share problems and progress with; people to learn from as we build up wisdom and experience.

We will also need a sense of God's grace in our lives, a sense of being loved and held by him, a sense of his walking beside us – a 'walking-beside' that is not founded on being judged or 'caught out,' that does not have its basis primarily in fear. For if we try to forgive out of fear (for example, fearing God's judgment on us if we do not forgive) what we do will be too much focused on ourselves. It will be coming from an unhealthy compulsion which will distort our perceptions and probably do more harm than good. This is not to say that we have to be 'fear-free' and perfect before we try to forgive others – who could be? It is rather to say that we need to know a measure of acceptance as we face the challenges of forgiveness. We need the freedom to be puzzled and perplexed. And we need to remember that this is God's work, that forgiveness is a gift and a grace which is his work in us and in the world around us.

learning to forgive

Were we to commit to learning this craft, what might it mean in practice? What possibilities might it create and what limits would still remain? Let us look at the following scenarios of friendships that have broken down – an experience most of us have had.

Mary and Pat are Christians who have been friends for years. Both attend the same fairly conservative church. Pat finds herself drawn to a new 'charismatic' church but Mary is concerned – she, too, was drawn to a similar kind of church but was badly hurt by the experience. Meanwhile, Pat is frustrated and angered by Mary's coolness. Eventually the underlying tensions bubble to the surface and Pat and Mary have an argument that shocks both of them with its intensity, depth and viciousness. Their friendship, it seems, lies in tatters.

The Smith's and the Jones's are next-door neighbours and friends. Freddy Smith is eight years old and a football fan. He plays in the street with his football almost every day. Inevitably, it goes over the Jones's fence from time to time – landing in the flowerbeds, bouncing off the car. Mr Jones fumes; Mrs Jones does not want to cause a scene. One day Freddy breaks a window in the Jones's garden shed. Mr Jones's anger boils over – things are said to the Smiths about their son, about their 'selfishness,' about their failings as parents. Shocked by this outburst, the Smith's give as good as they get.

Joe McCready is in hospital for a heart bypass operation. His brother, Dan, promised that he would keep an eye on Joe's house and look after the garden while Joe was in the hospital. When Joe gets home, the garden is a mess and the house is not much better. Joe is angry at his brother's lack of consideration and his broken promises, especially since he feels that Dan has always been the family favourite, indulged and able to get away with things. He cannot let himself get angry for he has never been able to confront family problems, so he writes a letter telling Dan to stay away. He will have nothing more to do with him.

Brenda and Connor have been married for five years. Connor has always liked a drink and a bet on the horses. Lately, though, Brenda is worrying about how much Connor is spending and drinking. When she mentions it to him, he gets angry, claiming that it is not a problem. One day she suggests that they should go together and get some counselling. She tells him that she has got the name of someone who could help them. Connor refuses to even consider it – he will not talk to strangers about his personal life, and, he declares, he will not talk about it any more with Brenda either.

What now? In these different scenarios, what needs to happen if they are to forgive one another and put things right – or are some of these relationships too badly torn to be mended? What if one wants reconciliation and the other does not – is a one-sided forgiveness possible? Or, if some are Christians, should they rush round the next day and proclaim instant forgiveness because that is what Christians 'should do,' whether they want to or not?

The first thing they probably need is time to recover and reflect. In arguments of this depth, people usually need time to assimilate the shock of what's happened and to gain some perspective. Initially, the feelings can seem overwhelming as hurtful words and attitudes are replayed. The pain feels huge, as does the anger and sense of injustice. The desire to hit back, to wreak due vengeance is also immensely strong. At this stage, it's

likely that each will be demonising the other, projecting all the negatives outwards, feeling that the only way forward is for 'them to come and apologise.' From outside the situation, responsibilities and rights and wrongs might appear straightforward. But from inside, it looks very different.

Each needs to take time to face whatever feelings have been thrown up, including the 'negative' ones which some Christians find it hard to acknowledge in themselves. For the process of forgiveness finds its genesis and development in honesty and reality: if we cannot be honest about the dark things which lurk in our hearts, then there is no possibility of healthy progress. We need to know the depth of our hurt and anger before we can begin to choose the path ahead – and to let them rip at God, a trusted friend or even an inanimate piece of paper! We may also need to work out how much protection we feel we need from the one who has hurt us, for we need to look after ourselves as well as the other in any future attempts at relationship. Additionally, we may need to mourn the loss of the relationship we once had (or thought we had), for if it has been severely broken, despite the fact that it may yet be mended, may even be better, richer and more mature than before, there will still be the loss of what it was – and that needs to be acknowledged.

This takes maturity and responsibility – responsibility for ourselves and our actions in this situation, past, present and future. Such maturity shows itself in a willingness and commitment to look inside ourselves, not only at our hurt and desire for retaliation but also at how we may have contributed to the problem. In conflict, there is always the temptation to invest all justice and righteousness on 'my side' and all evil and injustice on the other. But the gospel tells us that this is (usually) a lopsided view of reality and calls us to look for the mote in our own eye. This is painful and again needs to be done in the light of grace, for some personalities will tend to take too much blame and fault on themselves, while others will try to push all wrongdoing outwards. As Greg Jones comments, we like to see ourselves as 'self-righteous judges [or] as helpless victims'¹ rather than the flawed and only partially mature people that we are. Seeking the perspective of someone outside the situation, someone who is wise and will keep confidence, can be helpful – as is asking one or two to hold the situation before God in prayer, asking for wisdom to clear our vision. Writing down thoughts and feelings can also be useful in connecting with what is inside us and should, over time, lead to shifts in perspective.

Having looked inside and taken time to reflect, choices have to be made: do we try to move toward the other in the hope of mending the relationship; do we sit tight waiting for the offender to make the first move; or do we decide to walk away – either permanently or for now? Many factors influence these decisions – the value placed on the relationship, our previous experience in such situations, our beliefs and hopes about the priority (or otherwise) of doing the hard work of seeking reconciliation. A lot depends too on where we are in our lives at a particular time, how secure in ourselves we feel. Some have been so damaged in relationships that they find it hard to take the risks involved in reaching out to those who have hurt them, or whom they have hurt. Obviously, the more both parties genuinely want to work things out, the more likely it is that they will. And there is usually some level of self-interest in choosing the path of forgiveness and reconciliation, for unresolved bitterness and resentment are heavy burdens to carry. Laying them down (which is the process of forgiveness) can be a blessed relief, freeing aspects of ourselves that we had not perhaps even realised were bound.

The choice to move toward the other is a choice both to forgive and to risk, for difficult times are likely to lie ahead as the past is talked about,

hard things faced and commitments made to move on. The outcome of such a choice can never be predicted, since one can never really know how the other will respond. Offers may be rejected, which can be very painful – and this also poses the question of what forgiveness may mean when reconciliation is not possible. Does a one-sided forgiveness have any meaning?

Yes, it does – though it is harder and less complete than when the hurt between people can be acknowledged, turned from and ‘resolved.’ Many feel such a forgiveness to be a travesty of justice, an immoral act which condones wrong, sometimes very grievous wrong. It is true that relationship can be restored only if truth is told and wrong owned and repented of – we see this in the gospel. Yet we see there also a movement towards the offender which is founded on an accurate appraisal (or judgement) of his or her culpability, but which acts nonetheless from deep wells of love and grace. As Miroslav Volf argues in *Exclusion and Embrace*, God puts grace first in order that justice may be done. A one-sided forgiveness is hard and perforce limited. It is an internal process, dealing with the other ‘as they exist in our mind and heart.’² But it is still a choice not to demonise the other; a choice not to hold on to the hurt and the anger, a refusal to let them ossify into a bitterness which closes down any future possibilities that might arise. Such forgiveness is similar to the love of enemies. It is a holding of the other and one’s anger toward them before God, asking for his grace to touch both. It is a laying of one’s rage before him, asking for the grace not to act on it. And it is a gradual letting go. It is also a commitment to praying for the other’s good and for future opportunities of restoration. It is a learning, in so far as is possible, from our mistakes in this particular situation and a praying for growth in our ability to relate to others. It is an understanding that, in human relationships, hurt is often perpetrated not so much by a ‘good’ person on a ‘bad,’ as by one parcel of human damage and immaturity on another.

What of the memories? ‘Forgive and forget’ is advice often given when relationships break down, but is it sensible? Coate speaks of good and bad remembering.³ Bad or unhealthy remembering is the kind which broods over the wrongs suffered, stoking up hatred of the other and refusing to look at any possible wrong in the self, or any interpretation of events but one’s own. This will harm the ‘rememberer.’ However, good remembering is a realistic and healthy way of dealing with the hurts of the past. In this, nothing is denied or frozen into repression; feelings and actions are acknowledged, but choices are made not to be bound by them – to absorb them and move on, open to the possibility of restoration and a new future. Inherent in this is a loss of innocence about human relationships, but also a growing maturity in handling them; a maturity which can face up to pain and acknowledge loss, but also see the possibility of moving through it to deeper and richer friendships with other human beings – and with God.

And what of the times when both sides want to try to forgive and start again? As stated above, there is still risk and no automatic guarantee of ‘success.’ Both parties will approach the first meetings very gingerly, feeling uncertain and awkward. There will be many questions in their minds: ‘Can I cancel the debt of the hurt and injury they caused me and begin to trust again? What if they hurt me again?’ Yet if truth, understanding and genuine apology are there, then forgiveness and a new friendship can come more easily than might be expected. Herein lie the possibilities for change, growth and enrichment which forgiveness opens up.

If this happens, can we go back to where we were before, act as if the conflict never happened? No – it is simply not possible for things to be exactly as they were: we cannot undo the past; we are not entirely the

same people. But we can move on into something different and, potentially, better. Sometimes, aspects of the old relationship which were unhealthy will have to be cut away. Sometimes, the new relationship will be less close, or have a different shape and feel to it; sometimes it will be much closer – each situation is different. Sometimes the words ‘I forgive you’ never actually need to be spoken – they are inherent in the healing that has happened.

In each of our possible scenarios, choices now lie ahead: to turn away like Joe, unable to confront his brother (or himself) – or to see a bigger picture, the hope of friendship restored, and to begin to work towards that, with all the risks attendant on such a commitment. As we have said before, many factors influence such decisions, but the choice lies, ultimately, with each individual. No one can predict the outcome.

conclusion

It is beyond the scope of this paper to look at forgiveness in cases where there has been serious, perhaps criminal, abuse between people; cases where power has been brutally abused and others victimised. The above arguments are, I think, still relevant (particularly in relation to the forgiveness of enemies), but considerations of protection and separation from the perpetrator would have to be paramount and immense caution exercised in any attempts towards reconciliation, since words of repentance come easily to the lips of many abusers but fail to reach their behaviour. There may be people that it is not safe for us to be with (whether physically, emotionally, sexually or spiritually) and we need to be realistic about that. However, in time, with help, and in the light of God’s grace, we may be able to bring them and our feelings about them before God, asking that he will release his grace in us to let the past go.

Forgiveness can never be demanded. Only harm will come from trying to coerce people into it: it is a gift which can be given or received only in freedom. It is a choice in which concern for the self is echoed in concern for others and in a commitment to the building of a community that makes visible the values of the Kingdom of God. It is a journey, a process which demands honesty, realism and hard work – and the acceptance that some situations will not be healed in this life. It is also a grace, a recognition of the ongoing work of God in the lives of ourselves and others, working in places where we cannot, surprising us with unexpected gifts. It involves risk and vulnerability, but it holds within itself the possibility of breaking the destructive cycles of past conflict, of bringing healing to deep wounds and new life to damaged relationships. It opens a way towards growth. It is, crucially, a place of encounter with our re-making and ‘re-membling’ God, the God of the Cross – and of the Resurrection.

notes

1. Jones, L. Gregory, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1995) p.126.
2. Coate, M.A., *Sin, Guilt and Forgiveness: The Hidden Dimensions of a Pastoral Process* (SPCK: London, 1994) p.87.
3. Ibid, p88.

author's acknowledgements

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

And the work of Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities.

recommended reading

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

websites

www.forgiving.org
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 www.forgivenessweb.org
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 website.lineone.net/~andrewhdknock/index.html

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about the author

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