



forgiveness

forgiveness in the anabaptist tradition
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introducing the series

This paper is the sixth 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 papers 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.

introduction

'Anabaptist' began as a term of abuse used to refer to members of a sixteenth century religious movement which grew out of the Reformation. 'Anabaptist' simply means one who is baptized again as a believer, but it was used pejoratively to identify people whose beliefs were considered dangerous, anti-establishment and anti-social by those who didn't agree with or understand the movement.¹

Anabaptists still retain this once negative appellation, though it would be a mistake to think of Anabaptists as set apart only by their baptismal practice. In addition to this 'believer's baptism', the Anabaptist tradition is marked by a strong reverence for scripture, a firm commitment to participation in a community of believers, a clear support of non-violent resistance, and a belief in distinct separation between the church of believers and the state religion or government.²

Noting these commitments sheds light on a particular Anabaptist view of forgiveness that can be found in the movement throughout its entire history. Many Anabaptists, historical³ and contemporary,⁴ believe the practice of church discipline provides a community of accountability for believers, which is necessary for forgiveness, restitution and return to righteous behaviour when community members err.

Discipline within the church has often received bad press, and not without just cause. Harsh or punitive judgement masquerading as discipline leads to estrangement of individuals in their personal and religious lives. Moreover, long-term estrangement from the church seems entirely opposite from the goal of forgiveness which is to bring those who have made mistakes back into the community. But the fact that discipline can be and has been distributed badly does not mean that it is not a helpful concept when done out of love, according to the biblical model.

Before considering a helpful model of church discipline, we must first see just what 'church discipline' means and how it is intimately related to forgiveness. Then we will look at the historical roots of this idea in early Anabaptism before finally looking more closely at a contemporary model of church discipline offered by Anabaptist Marlin Jeschke.

forgiveness and church discipline

Even if discipline seems like a difficult or problematic idea, one cannot ignore the fact that it is clearly biblical. The primary New Testament text relating to church discipline is found in Matthew's gospel:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two others along with you, that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a pagan or a tax collector. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.
(Matthew 18: 15-18)

This passage shows that discipline involves community accountability,

and also that discipline has, as its goal, restoration of relationships. Jeschke, a contemporary proponent of appropriate church discipline, defines church discipline as "the ministry of disciplining a Christian brother or sister whose spiritual health and life are endangered by a particular act or attitude."⁵ Jeschke goes on to point out that 'discipline' comes from the same root word as 'discipling.' In the same way that mission and evangelism aim to disciple those who have not become Christians, bringing them into the community, discipline tries to restore to the community those who have strayed.⁶ Thus, church discipline is a biblically precedented act of discipleship, modelled by Jesus himself. According to Jeschke,

Evangelism and church discipline are both acts of discipling. There is a continuity between them. Jesus called his disciples, instructed and corrected them, restored a Peter who had denied, and 'excommunicated' a Judas. In the same way the church today calls people into Christ's way. It then instructs them in that way and, if necessary, corrects and restores them to the Christian way. If necessary, the church also recognizes and respects some people's abandonment of the Christian way.⁷

It is this idea of restoration as the goal of discipline that gives insight into the intimate relationship between discipline and forgiveness. Properly instituted church discipline aims to restore members of a community to good relationships with God and the rest of the community by promoting restitution and a return to righteousness. In the words of John Howard Yoder, "The discipline...is the renewal of the call to forgiveness, rendered real by the word of the brother...Discipline is not to be held in tension or in balance with grace and forgiveness, it is grace and forgiveness."⁸

Given their strong emphasis on community, it is not difficult to understand how Anabaptists would have latched on to church discipline as an essential aspect of giving and receiving forgiveness. For the idea of church discipline says that forgiveness does not occur only in a vertical relationship between God and a believer, but must also occur in horizontal relationships between believers. In the same way that participation in a church community fosters more adequate interpretation of scripture, so too does community life establish expectations for the members' behaviour and provide structures of accountability. Evidence of this commitment to community can be found in the intention of early Anabaptists' re-baptism. It was intended to be "both a pledge to God and to one's fellow believers to live piously and in brotherly fellowship thereafter. This additional corporate aspect is vital. It was derived from their understanding of the goal of salvation as not just forensic pardon or personal forgiveness but as the restoration of both the holy life and the holy community."⁹ So, the idea of corporate forgiveness and community strength is implicit even in the re-baptisms - the most obvious sign of the early Anabaptists' distinction.

forgiveness and church discipline: historical anabaptism

However, there is much more to the history of church discipline in Anabaptist circles, and it would be unfair to consider the evolution of this concept without reference to the social and religious climate of the sixteenth century out of which Anabaptism arose. It was a time of religious upheaval; persecution was commonplace during the Reformation. Anabaptists, being on the far left, or 'radical' wing of the Reformation, found themselves in disagreement with most of the population and all of

the authorities. However, having a commitment to non-violence, Anabaptists could not separate themselves by violent means. Rather, "they sought in non-violent ways to bring about change from one situation to another more nearly representative of God's will. They did this by means of establishing a new, disciplined community."¹⁰ In order to be obviously different from the world, they needed to be pure and separate.¹¹ The church would be made up of true believers who had chosen to believe, and the church would retain this righteousness by holding community members accountable for their wrongs. The first mark of a true church for the Anabaptists was regeneration, or a new birth in Christ. This needed to occur before baptism so that believers had truly chosen to follow Christ themselves. Thus believer's baptism was the second mark of the true church. The third mark was discipline.¹² In fact, almost all branches of early Anabaptists "upheld the conviction that where there was no application of discipline, according to Matthew 18, there was no true church."¹³

The idea of a pure and separate church may sound exclusive today, but it should be considered with sensitivity to historical particulars. As a social minority, and a minority despised by the authorities, Anabaptists were in danger of being used unfairly as scapegoats. In order to avoid villainisation, Anabaptists had to be careful to live piously according to their beliefs. They also had to be sure that they stood apart on the basis of their religious distinctives, and that their name would not just become an insult to hurl at any dissenter.

Although it may have been separate, the Anabaptist church was not at all exclusive. Anabaptists believed that the church was "a voluntary fellowship of regenerated believers, a Christian brotherhood, a community of the redeemed."¹⁴ Distinct from some reformed groups, the Anabaptists did not see the church as a group of baptized individuals, or a group of elect persons. The church was primarily a community of individuals who had personally accepted Christ. In this way, though the level of accountability for participants was high, the membership was neither exclusive nor limited to a particular few.

The goal of church discipline throughout the history of Anabaptism was clearly not to punish but to bring church members back to righteousness and right relationships with the church and God. Discipline was meant to be " 'a work of love' towards [erring members], intended to win them back, and not as a punitive measure."¹⁵ Primarily, this was carried out according to the literal instructions of Matthew 18. Someone who had sinned would be confronted first in private and then brought in front of the church to confess if a private confrontation was unsuccessful.¹⁶ Finally, if the sinner was unresponsive to the confrontation or unwilling to change his destructive behaviour, 'the ban' was carried out - that is, the person was excommunicated until the time at which he or she reconciled with the church.¹⁷

It is significant to note that the ban was not meant for persons who repeatedly fell into sin, but rather those who were unwilling to repent of sin - in other words, "a person who is unwilling to desist from a scandalous, open sin."¹⁸ That is, the ban was not meant to suggest that humans could be sinless, but that when they did sin, they must do what was necessary to restore strained relationships, or give and receive forgiveness. Menno Simons, a prominent Anabaptist reformer, is very

clear about the intent of discipline and the ban: forgiveness and restoration were the primary concerns. According to Simons, "If he [the sinner] affectionately receives the admonition of his faithful brethren, confesses his fall, is truly sorry, promises to do better, and brings forth fruits worthy of repentance, then no matter how he has transgressed, receive him as a returning, beloved brother."¹⁹ For Simons, excommunication is never about throwing out a believer. It is rather about acknowledging the fact that someone has already chosen to cut himself or herself off from God:

Understand correctly, no one is excommunicated or expelled by us from the communion of the brethren but those who have already separated and expelled themselves from Christ's communion either by false doctrine or by improper conduct. For we do not want to expel any, but rather to receive; not to amputate, but rather to heal; not to discard, but rather to win back; not to grieve, but rather to comfort; not to condemn, but rather to save.²⁰

There can be no doubt that church discipline as understood in the sixteenth century was often carried out poorly or punitively. The question of discipline even in contemporary Anabaptist circles is divisive because some would argue that an idea that has historically often been hurtful cannot currently be helpful. There are at least two significant problems with church discipline as it was historically carried out which merit consideration before we can move to a contemporary model of church discipline. First, there is the concern that the ban, or shunning as it was later called, cannot be restorative because it represents a complete cutting off from the community of good influence. Certainly it must be nearly impossible, for especially the most resolute sinner, to wish for restoration with the church if he or she has no contact with the church. Furthermore, forced departure from any group is likely to engender bad feelings which would make it realistically much more difficult to return. In a letter to a church that is clearly erring with regards to discipline, Menno Simons reiterates that the ban should be lifted immediately when there is repentance and not used punitively:

If the ban was in part instituted for the purpose of repentance, how then, if repentance is already shown (namely, in the contrite sorrowing heart), can excommunication be pronounced against such? Oh my brethren, cease from such plans, for it tends to destroy and not to reform...I seek to use the ban in a noble, fraternal spirit, in faithful love according to the doctrine of Christ and His apostles, as I have abundantly declared in my writings over five years ago.²¹

Similarly problematic is the concern that accountability can only be expected for transgressions that are obvious to human community members. Since many sins occur in the heart or in private, it would seem that discipline instituted by the church could not help but be arbitrary - openly punishing those who have the misfortune to commit public sins rather than private. Menno Simons addressed this problem by asserting that God does the true judging of the heart and God will consider sins not obvious to church members. According to Simons, if someone should "sin against God in private...in this matter we are not so to judge; for it is a matter between a man and his God."²² Simons also notes that "The church can judge only as to the visible; what is inwardly wicked, and not outwardly apparent to the church...of that God is to judge, for he alone tries the hearts and reins, and not the church."²³

There is a significant point in these last quotations. Some might oppose the idea of church discipline on the grounds that it is not for humans to judge other humans. But implicit in these last lines is a recognition that this is not the case. God is the judge, and human discipline is meant to encourage already believing members of the church to live up to their commitments to God. It is first meant to encourage and then meant to restore relationships that have been damaged by sinning persons, first to promote right action and then to promote forgiveness. Church discipline was never meant to be a court of eternal judgement. From its inception it was clearly intended to be a human safeguard and help to all sinners, all church members.

So it seems that the idea of church discipline is biblical and the intent one of love and restoration. However, in many cases discipline has been done badly throughout the years. This alone does not give us license to dismiss the idea all together. As Jeschke says, "the answer to bad church discipline is good church discipline not no church discipline."²⁴ But what would this 'good church discipline' look like? Having identified the biblical precedent for church discipline, and examined the religious tradition in which it is strongly rooted, it is now appropriate to consider more closely the work of contemporary Anabaptist Marlin Jeschke in his thorough exploration of discipline, *Discipling the Church*.

forgiveness and church discipline: a contemporary model

Jeschke is very clear that the appropriate goal of discipline is forgiveness. He distinguishes between two flawed views of forgiveness and what he calls "authentic forgiveness," claiming that authentic forgiveness is the goal of discipline. For Jeschke, one of the distorted views of forgiveness holds that forgiveness is easy and endless. Most of the work lies on the side of the forgiver who, in an effort to show endless mercy, requires no penalty for wrongdoing.²⁵ This view "assumes that forgiveness represents a change in the forgiver instead of in the one forgiven...[this] indulgent view of forgiveness leaves the sinner a sinner."²⁶ The second flawed view is harsh and punitive, requiring punishment of the sinner. For Jeschke, "Punishment actually hinders repentance and forgiveness because it becomes a substitute for ethical transformation."²⁷ Though these views lie on opposite ends of the spectrum, the fault is the same. Neither requires the offender to change - the lenient view lets the offender off the hook, the harsh view lets the offender substitute punishment for transformation.²⁸

For Jeschke, the alternative to these options is "authentic forgiveness." "True forgiveness brings a formerly sinful person to a new mentality, attitude, and course of action. It creates the capacity to envisage and adopt a new pattern of behaviour marked by self-respect and respect for others - in short, one of love and justice."²⁹ Jeschke asserts that if we understand how authentic Christian forgiveness works, we can clearly recognize specific steps towards forgiveness in the administration of discipline, or "discipling" as Jeschke calls it. First, discipline requires that a confession be made that is a "specific address to the specific problem with specific counsel," not merely a "routine confession."³⁰ Second, authentic forgiveness in the form of discipline offers the necessary help to those who need it. Those willing to truly forgive must realise that a person cannot stop a destructive behaviour without the correct resources to help him or her return to righteousness. "True grace does not consist of empty words but strength-communicating acts that enable the overcoming of

transgression."³¹ Third, forgiveness gives up the call for punishment. If the goal of repentance and forgiveness is to lead the offender back to right action, then punishment is unhelpful after repentance and forgiveness have occurred. Fourth, the church should use "visible symbolic acts" to express forgiveness. Historically, the church has used 'the laying on of hands' for this purpose. And finally, when forgiveness is achieved, the forgiven person must be free to have a new life in the church. Past sins should not be held against them or brought up in any way once there has been forgiveness. For Jeschke, this is because "forgiveness is not a toleration of sin but the overcoming of sin and the realization of a new spiritual and moral state of affairs."³² This allows everyone, regardless of his or her initial relationship to the church, to have a new, joyful life in the church.

But this brings us to the more difficult part of Jeschke's prescription, namely, what to do if repentance is not present. For Jeschke, "the formal act of forgiveness should occur only where the church recognizes penitence and the abandonment of sin."³³ This of course leads to the possibility that the church should not extend forgiveness if a member is not penitent. Jeschke would support this assertion, claiming that "the church is not to forgive automatically. The appropriateness of forgiveness depends on certain conditions" where those conditions include proper remorse and restitution.³⁴ But what is the alternative to forgiveness? Jeschke admits that it is excommunication, acknowledging that this word has such negative historical connotations. Attempting to rescue it from some of its baggage, Jeschke, like Menno Simons 400 years earlier, emphasizes that excommunication always includes the possibility of restoration. Thus, excommunication does not cut the impenitent off from grace, but rather serves as a source of accountability among fallible humans. Though it might seem initially as though excommunication cuts off the possibility of restoration, Jeschke argues that conversely,

Excommunication is the form under which the church continues to extend the gospel to the impenitent. Excommunication is not, then loveless condemnation...It is as necessary in spiritual life as candid diagnosis is in medical practice. Persons cannot find spiritual healing without facing the truth. Far from being unloving, evangelical excommunication is the only loving and redeeming course of action possible toward impenitent individuals in given circumstances. It is also the only appropriate way for the church to preserve its integrity and its witness to the world.³⁵

Having considered a thumbnail sketch of Jeschke's prescription for forgiveness, a few points merit further emphasis by way of conclusion. First, it may seem difficult to advocate this sort of approach to sin when we all know we are sinners ourselves. After all, who are we to cast the first stone? However, recognizing ourselves as sinners, we should be grateful for communities of caring believers who wish to commit time and energy to helping us meet our own spiritual goals. We will certainly fail, but it should be comforting to know that a safety net exists to help us honour commitments. Second, it is important to note that Jeschke's prescription does not distribute disciplinary measures that are directly relative to the severity of the sin. Though some errors clearly warrant different responses, admonition is not used for lesser transgressions while excommunication reserved for only the very worst offences. The system is set up to return the believer to righteous behaviour, and the severity of the disciplinary measure is related to the offender's response, not the nature

of his or her offence. This point emphasizes the fact that church discipline is not intended to keep sinners away from the church. It is intended to hold a compassionate mirror up to those who are in error, showing them not only their error, but also how restoration can be achieved.

Finally, it should be noted that forgiveness, as it is achieved through church discipline, is a very particular sort of forgiveness pertaining to a very particular sort of group. Implicit in this structure is the idea that the church in question be a group of close, committed, believers with sensitive and scripturally sound leadership. The prescription for forgiveness offered herein does not pertain to wrongful acts committed against a person by a stranger or a non-Christian. Similarly, it does not address the benefits to the forgiver's well being that come with granting forgiveness to a transgressor, whether this person is penitent or not. But simply because it is not a comprehensive system does not mean that it is not a helpful system for regulating inter-church relationships. After all, we should not notice only pain caused outside the church's walls when there is so much forgiveness and accountability required within.

The history of church discipline, both within the Anabaptist tradition and beyond, is not spotless. But both positive and negative examples in history can show us that when discipline is done out of love for another, with sensitivity and compassion, it is a profoundly biblical way to strengthen the spiritual life of a believer by means of accountability to a community of individuals who share fundamental commitments. Furthermore, when done properly, church discipline helps retain the significance of church membership and strengthens the church's witness to the world. A difficult idea on many levels, nonetheless we would do well to recover a positive understanding of church discipline in our own ecclesiology.

conclusion

We have noted that the model of forgiveness outlined here deals specifically with relationships within the Christian church. However, this is not to say that the principles of forgiveness set out have no significance beyond the church. Three of these principles stand as a challenge to us in trying to think about forgiveness in social or political contexts.

The first is that forgiveness only makes sense in the context of relationship. While our social relationships and our political relationships may not have the same intentionality or significance as those within the church, this is not to say that they do not exist, nor that they cannot be charged with a greater depth and significance if we wish them to be so.

If a strong community is prerequisite for any meaningful account of forgiveness then we cannot talk of forgiveness in the community or in politics without at the same time seeking to foster the strength of that community. This, however, must be done realistically. A social community or a political community cannot hope to replicate the intimacy of an ecclesial community. Forgiveness, as a political or social concept, can never attain to the fullness of the Christian vision.

The second important principle is that forgiveness cannot be separated from accountability. The practice of church discipline is the means by which men and women are held accountable for their actions. Without discipline real forgiveness is impossible. In its place there is only a cheap

forgiveness, a pale imitation of the reality.

Thus the model of forgiveness held before us cannot work in a society that wishes to forget the past or 'let sleeping dogs lie'. Nor is it compatible with a society that seeks for declarations of forgiveness or acts of reconciliation without any means of addressing the reasons why forgiveness or reconciliation are required.

Again we need to recognise that the community of the church is different from other social or political communities and we must take account of that. However, the principle that cheap forgiveness is no forgiveness has a universal currency.

The final principle that we can draw from this Anabaptist model is that, however rigorous the process of discipline may be, the end of that process is restoration of damaged relationships and the restoration to wholeness of the community. Its aim is a generous and constructive one. Discipline is not designed to destroy or to condemn permanently those who come under it, a temptation that many of us too easily fall into. Paralleling cheap forgiveness, this is cheap discipline. But this cheap discipline, failing to offer the hope of restoration, is not Christian discipline.

Once more, allowances must be made for the difference between the community of the church and the social and political community. However, if in making these allowances we go so far as to undermine or invert these Christian principles, we have subverted a core part of the church's mission of witness to world. For, to the extent that the church models these practices in its own life, it is able to demonstrate to the wider society what it means to live as a community that takes seriously the breakdown of relationship but takes equally seriously the possibility of restoration.

notes

1. Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Conrad Press: Waterloo, Ontario 1973) p 1.
2. For a very helpful and concise introduction to anabaptism, see William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI 1996).
3. Kenneth R. Davis, "No Discipline, No Church: An Anabaptist Contribution to the Reformed Tradition." *Sixteenth Century Journal XIII*, No. 4 (1982) p 43-58.
4. Marlin Jeschke, *Disciplining the Church* (Herald Press: Scottsdale, PA 1988).
5. Ibid p 17.
6. Ibid pp 16-17.
7. Ibid
8. John H. Yoder, "Introduction." Marlin Jeschke, *Disciplining the Church* (Herald Press: Scottsdale, PA 1988).
9. Kenneth Davis, p 43.
10. Walter Klaassen, p 10.
11. Peter H. Davids, "An Anabaptist View of the Church." *Evangelical Quarterly*. 56 (April 1981); pp 82-83
12. William R. Estep, pp 243-247.
13. Kenneth Davis, p 45.
14. Erland Waltner, "The Anabaptist Conception of the Church." *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*. Vol. XXV, No. 1. p 9.
15. Ibid p 14.
16. Jean Runzo, "Research Notes." *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. Vol 53. p 78-79
17. Josef Ludwig, "The Relationship Between Sanctification and Church Discipline in Early Anabaptism." *Evangelical Journal*. Vol 14 (Fall 1996) pp 77-85.
18. Ibid p 78.
19. Menno Simons, "Admonition on Church Discipline." *The Complete Writings*. Ed. John Christian Wenger (Mennonite Publishing House: Scottsdale, PA 1956) p 413.
20. Ibid p 413.
21. Menno Simons, "Instruction on Discipline to the Church at Franeker." in Wenger (ed.) p 413.
22. Menno Simons, "Instruction on Excommunication." In Wenger (ed.) p 979.
23. Erland Waltner, p 13.
24. Marlin Jeschke, p 19.
25. Ibid p 63.
26. Ibid
27. Ibid p 64.
28. Ibid
29. Ibid p 65.
30. Ibid p 65.
31. Ibid p 67.
32. Ibid p 68.
33. Ibid p 72.
34. Ibid p 89.
35. Ibid pp 88-89

recommended reading*introductory article*

Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor" pp 38-45 *Christianity Today*
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theological perspectives

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

websites

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www.forgivenessweb.org
www.forgiveness-institute.org
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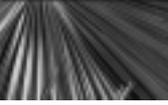
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