



# 12 forgiveness

forgiveness and the church

lesley carroll

### introducing the series

This paper is the twelfth 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.

CCCI: 2002

## two windows on my world

Another busy day – Summer Club week and at last the day draws to a close. The older kids have been dismissed for another evening and the tidying up has begun. From the street the regular sounds of shouting filter through the open doors but then a voice shouts, 'Come quick, they're throwing stones!' Out into the street – the kids are our responsibility and we need to get them home in one piece. Loyal kids, eight to twelve years old, are getting stuck in. Insults and bricks are flying. I go up to the fence erected to keep peace and try to persuade the kids from the 'other side' to go home while other leaders speak to 'our' kids. I'm getting nowhere so I get into the car with another leader and drive around the peace line to speak with those on the far distant other side. I get out of the car, dirty and tired in my denim shorts. The kids shout to one another, 'It's the peelers! Run!'

*what hope is there for forgiveness when there is no meeting?*

The year is 1988. Studies have been completed and my time as assistant served long enough for me to have reached the year of ordination. It is a daunting prospect, even when young and fanciful and energetic. I am afraid to presume too much, afraid of the responsibility, yet drawn by a call affirmed within the life of a congregation. The phone rings. It is one of my colleagues. He and another colleague want to call and speak with me. We have shared so much – worry about exams, struggle with theological ideas, bible study and prayer, classes and leisure time, friendship. But they have come to explain why they cannot take part in my ordination service and maybe there is just a hint of something more – they think I'm wrong, unbiblical, not reading the call correctly. Don't they know how much I've agonised and prayed about this? I'm sure it took courage for them to come and visit me. But in that moment every seed of bitterness that had been blowing across the topsoil of my experience sunk deep roots to grow a tree of hurt bearing the fruit of hurt, of insecurity, of fear to trust, fear of those who lived as friends, fear of any relationship of trust, for trust is so easily and unexpectedly shattered.

*how could I even think of forgiveness never mind dare to speak of it?*

## introduction

I have been invited to reflect on the church's practice of forgiveness in its own life. It is, perhaps, strange for a Presbyterian to begin with experience but that is precisely where I want to begin. It has been in experience that a biblical understanding of forgiveness has become challenging. It is in the effort to practice forgiveness that my understanding of what the bible teaches and calls the Christian community to has been deepened. Indeed, it is in our very experience that forgiveness has to make its lodging if it is to be a living, liberating reality.

I am an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), a woman who has discovered forgiveness to be a challenging theological category which can affect the internal relationships of my, and indeed any, Christian denomination. At ECONI's 2001 conference, 'Embodying Forgiveness,' I was asked to facilitate a seminar entitled, 'Crafting Communities of Forgiveness.' One of the participants commented that she had come to the seminar because she reckoned that if anyone knew about forgiveness it would be a woman minister in PCI. It was one of those moments that has become seminal. I had not for one moment thought about myself or about my own experience while preparing the seminar. Whether that was my natural instinct to shy away from talking about myself, or some subconscious avoidance of hurt, anger and the need both

to forgive and be forgiven remains open to debate. However, that innocent seminar has begun a new process for me in dealing with my past experience. This paper may, therefore, appear entirely subjective. My hope is that it will at least have objective moments for the reader, moments through which the need for communities of forgiveness is glimpsed.

### **setting the scene**

Undoubtedly forgiveness is about dealing with the past. The experience of life builds up reservoirs of memory that often conceal deep pools of hurt and anger. From those pools arise the things of brokenness, fractured relationship and separation. My own particular past, in this respect, begins in the years of studying to be a minister. It was already over ten years since PCI had taken the decision to open ordination to Word and Sacrament to women, but the church at large remained divided on the issue. The wider division became more concentrated in the college atmosphere where theological discussions were the order of the day and theological correctness a means of grace for belonging in the church.

I had not anticipated what it would be like in college. I knew there would be differences of opinion but I was unaware of the breakdown in community that would occur. I was of the conviction, and remain of the conviction, that people of differing opinions remain one in the body of Christ, justified by grace through faith, living in communion with Christ and one another.<sup>2</sup> Alongside many small and niggardly evidences of division, the most stark, and therefore most hurtful, came in the guise of an inability to worship with me if I were leading worship and a refusal to hold even an ordinary conversation.

Two thoughts influenced me and shaped my reactions. The first was the belief that everyone is entitled to his or her interpretation of scripture. As a Presbyterian, I believe that the church reserves the right to interpret its own standards, including the ultimate standard of scripture itself. But at the same time Presbyterians adhere to a notion of personal conscience that gives individuals the right to conclude for themselves what it is that scripture teaches. The Reformed emphasis on the language of the people was to make scripture more accessible to everyone so they could read for themselves the truths contained therein. Yet, the Church has never abandoned people to broad or wild interpretation but provides other secondary standards that give boundaries within which individuals interpret scripture for themselves. Interpretation is always under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. With my tradition I therefore affirm the right of persons to interpret scripture for themselves within the context of bounded space.

The second conviction, which was to shape my reactions, was a determination not to live only out of these negative experiences. Fifteen years later I have to admit that the hurt has run much deeper than I knew. My determination to live out of other, more positive, experiences has concealed the hurt and a consequent unforgiveness in my own life. I have heard that unforgiveness from time to time in my voice as it put people down, uttered cynical words about their character or shot bitter words in the direction of some who did not deserve it. In my reactions the realities of hurt, the need of forgiveness and the need to be forgiven were evident.

### **the place for forgiveness**

I make no excuse for myself, but I have known others whose hurt has run so deep that the strength and ability to bring it into the open and examine it has come only many years later. All of this is to say that forgiving others can be neither easily nor lightly done, not even within the 'community' of

the church where we are all one in Christ.

The church in its structure has been unable to facilitate me to forgive, neither challenging me nor guiding me in the direction of forgiveness. Perhaps this is too much to expect from an institutional structure, but it is clear that the church does not cope well with deep rivers of hurt or anger. There are those who will not listen and cannot hear the story of my experience. Yet the church invites ordinary people like me to find a place of healing and hope, a place where hurt and anger can be dealt with, often through the miracle of forgiveness.

An ability to hear people's stories and provide a safe space in which healing can happen should, it seems to me, be a primary commitment for the people who regularly pray, 'forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.' A church that is not discussing, facilitating or challenging people to forgive one another is a church not concerned enough about its relationship with God. Sin is that which fractures our relationship with God. If our sin is forgiven in the same way that we forgive, then unforgiveness and the lack of any practice of forgiveness, means that sin remains and the fracture remains fractured.

Churches, locally and structurally, as an expression of their searching after healthy, dynamic, relationship with God, need to be communities in which forgiveness can be practised and known. They will, therefore, need to develop the relationships and places of meeting necessary for people to feel safe enough to express anger and hurt, so necessary on this journey to forgiveness. In a society where short-term relationships dominate, marriages break down and agreements across sectarian divides are fragile and easily broken, working at relationships of safety is key in developing not only Christian communities where forgiveness can happen but also a society in which forgiveness can happen. In a community where people eyeball one another in hatred and bitterness, a church that cannot help people eyeball one another on a journey to forgiveness has little to offer either in terms of Christian counter-culture or in terms of skilling its people for living gospel-empowered lives. It has little to offer in helping people develop meaningful relationships with God whom we ask to forgive us in the same way as we forgive those who sin against us. It will also have little to offer in terms of building relationships in a community where space is contested and division the order of the day.

### **the binding effects of sin**

In John's gospel we read:

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained (John 20:23).

Jesus speaks these words in the context of the mission with which he was charging his followers, telling them that he is sending them just as the Father sent him. Having been raised from death and before his ascension, Jesus appeared to the disciples where they were fearfully gathered behind closed doors. Rejoicing in the knowledge that he was alive, the disciples listened as Jesus told them that he was sending them into the world on the same mission that he himself had been entrusted with – the good news of the Gospel, lived out in a forgiveness-oriented lifestyle.

Jesus powerfully indicated the importance of forgiveness in human relationships, connecting forgiveness to a gospel-based lifestyle and witness and declaring forgiveness as a mark of the Spirit within. It is clear that through lack of forgiveness it is possible to become trapped and embittered. But there is a further consequence of unforgiveness. That

further consequence of unforgiveness is seen in holding others ransom to their sin, refusing them the grace of forgiveness and holding them far from the gospel of grace. The Protestant emphasis on the power of the cross is, in fact, an emphasis on God's act of forgiveness, albeit yet to be accepted, in the death of Jesus Christ. Without acts of forgiveness we run the danger of blinding others to the gospel of grace shown by a God who loved us while we were still sinners (see Romans 5.8). Each of us, through unforgiveness, runs the risk of not only allowing ourselves to become embittered but also of binding others by our unforgiveness.

The binding circle, which soon becomes a downward spiral of unforgiveness, results in an inability to grow. People become bound together in mutually damaging brokenness and fail to embody and witness to Christ's mission of forgiveness. The spiral is downwards into petrified, inescapable woundedness. There is no way out, and it is a place far from God.

### **forgiveness and interruption**

Hannah Arendt, a philosopher from the Jewish tradition who makes no special claims to ownership of the values of the Judeo-Christian community, asks what can be done when events appear to be irreversible. Her response is a striking call to the Christian community that claims to own Christ's mission and seeks to live a gospel that began in an act of forgiveness:

"The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility – of being unable to undo what has been done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing – is the faculty of forgiving. Hurt cannot always be made well, damage cannot be repaired. But forgiveness enables a moving on and the building of new relationship."<sup>3</sup>

Arendt views forgiveness as an interruptive moment in what appeared to be an irreversible circling, and with that interruptive moment a new relationship becomes possible. The one who offers and the one who receives forgiveness are both presented with the new possibility, no longer trapped by the consequences of a particular action. In the new relationship all will not necessarily be made well, but something much better becomes possible.

It is important to acknowledge that all will not be made well. In the context of our Northern Irish history, forgiving one who murdered a loved one will not bring that loved one back. In another situation, forgiving an abuser does not repair the damage or overlook the responsibility of the perpetrator. What forgiveness offers is the possibility of not being dominated by past hurt and brokenness. It may not result in the reconciliation of 'victim' and 'perpetrator,' but it does enable both to see themselves as more than sinner and sinned against. An act of forgiveness acknowledges that from the victim's perspective there have been thoughts, reactions, emotions, and behaviours that have fallen far short of the fullness of life God intends for us. These shortcomings, too, are sin and to acknowledge them as such does not detract from the perpetrator's responsibility. It does move us into the realm of knowing beyond a shadow of doubt that all have sinned and human relationships are complex and multi-layered.

My years in training have had far-reaching effects on my life, more than I either know or can fully articulate. The experience of those years has affected the prejudgements I make, the expectations I have of people from within certain theological schools of thinking, and also on the way I act and react within the life of the church. The consequences of those years have not gone away and attempting to forget and keep on has not

made all things well. However, if I can forgive there are new horizons of possibility. These horizons become all the more clear when I acknowledge that I too have sinned in thought, word and deed for there is no absolute innocence but forgiveness for all who humbly come to God. All of this is shot through with challenge often too hard for anyone to live up to. Yet if the church cannot honestly face up to the challenges, even if it is the case that there is not always the possibility of rising to those challenges, then there is little hope for those who can only peer in hatred at one another through the bars of a peace gate.

I have argued that unforgiveness in the life of the church, lack of teaching about forgiveness and lack of community in which forgiveness can be facilitated either formally or informally, damages the relationship of the community to its God. Unforgiveness also disables relationships between community members and ultimately the ability to continue Christ's mission of forgiveness in the world. Some strands emerge from my thinking and experience.

### **issues for local churches**

Local church communities are challenged to live lives that take forgiveness seriously, providing space for hurt and anger to be expressed and the journey towards forgiveness begun. A community that strives for such relationships, inevitably long-term and honest, has a powerful counter-cultural witness to make in a divided community, where relationships are often short-term and the option to walk away prematurely chosen. The first issue, then, for the church is the building of honest, open, accountable community.

Living in local communities in which forgiveness is a significant part, members of the community have their lives shaped by the Christian commitment to receive and offer forgiveness in response to what God has done for us. Thought patterns, actions and reactions, the ordering of priorities, the choices that individuals within the community make, will become changed by the embodiment of forgiveness not only as a theological category, but also as a way of life. Members of the community on their return to places of work, leisure and home life will bring with them a distinctly Christian way of life that will impact the various worlds in which each individual exists. The effects may not be immediately visible but this relational witness to the gospel will bear fruit in a world where people hunger after that which is meaningful and lasting. The second issue, then, for the church is to provide a training ground where people can learn and value the practice of giving and receiving forgiveness.

At an institutional level churches are challenged to put in place structures and provide education and counsel to enable gestures of forgiveness that will transform the denominations internally, transform their relationships with one another, and transform the relationship of the church with the world. As a pastor I meet too many people hurt and broken by their experience of the church, people who never want to return to the community of faith. I also meet a significant number of people who, when they look at the churches in Northern Ireland and beyond, argue that if church people can condemn or exclude one another, then their impact on the world is divisive. Institutionally, church in its denominations cannot escape the challenge to embody forgiveness not for its own sake but for the sake of the witness in the world, a witness that calls people to believe. The third issue, then, for the church locally is to build relationships with other people claiming to be church yet who are somewhat different from ourselves. Clearly the relationships need to be boundaried by conscience but these boundaries always need to be kept under scrutiny.

### issues for 'the church'

No matter how focused Christian people are on local church communities, in an increasingly secular world where people generally have less experience of church than they used to have, there is a tendency for churches to be lumped together as 'the Church.' All our Christian sensibilities, foibles, differences in theology and practice are viewed as insignificant and unimportant. To a world looking in, the Church appears as a group of people unable to agree with one another and arguing about things that don't really matter. In communities where drug addiction, prostitution, paramilitary domination, poverty, educational deprivation, housing and environmental issues, to name but a few, are matters of importance; the role of the Pope, differences in understandings of ordination or of justification by faith and the like are, to say the least, somewhat irrelevant.

I do not mean to suggest that theological differences are unimportant. Discussing and arguing about those differences is a good part of my daily grind, not because it makes for a good discussion but because how I understand what scripture teaches is of the utmost importance to me. However, in a secular world with all its concerns, it must appear that the Church is fiddling while Rome burns – another child is taken into a prostitution ring, another teenager is beaten with bats adorned with nails, another heroin addict is hooked. It seems to me that in the practice of forgiveness, the Church as a whole has a means of connecting back with the world.

There are, of course, other ways of reconnecting, for example, in the rediscovery and exercise of Christian social conscience and action and in the rediscovery of theological affirmations of everyone being created in the image of God. But from within its own relationships, the practice of forgiveness could possibly transform how the Church is viewed by the world as well as transforming denominational relationships. This is not a matter of setting aside or forgetting differences. It is, rather, a matter of churches listening to one another as the Church and of living in forgiveness for how we have misconstrued or misrepresented one another. The differences are not forgotten, but they are more honestly appraised and the image of Christ in one another more genuinely sought. It is a challenge to the Church to have the world turn and say of it, 'See how these Christians love one another!'

The scripture has never said, 'See how these Christians agree with one another.' In a world where disagreement and difference can so easily lead to conflict and violence, love – even in disagreement – is a greater witness than the desire for everyone to think the same in order that we may love one another. The history of denominational difference, of the misrepresentations we have made of one another and the hurt we have experienced from one another, renders the challenge of forgiveness a poignant one.

### vengeance as the alternative

It is pertinent at this stage to point to vengeance as the alternative and opposite road to forgiveness. If there is no forgiveness, things do not stand still. There may be years when broken relationships appear to stand still but in the lives of individuals these years may explode in physical or mental illness or distress. In the lives of nations or ethnic groups these differences may explode in warfare or low-grade conflict of every kind.

Forgiveness offers an alternative to the destruction of vengeance. There was war between the houses of Saul and David. It was a long war in which David became stronger and stronger and the house of Saul

became weaker and weaker. Inevitably the war was over land and was eventually settled by the defection of Saul's Commander Abner to David's side. But David's commander, Joab, sealed Abner's fate by murdering him in jealousy. Joab was led to avenge the house of David in Abner's death, unable to forgive what Abner had been. The bloodshed continued in death after death until David became the King of all Israel (2 Samuel 2.8-5.5).

But a famine lasting three years tore David's Kingdom apart so that he asked God what was wrong. On hearing that the famine was punishment for the havoc Saul had raged on the Gibeonites, David asked what the Gibeonites would require to expiate Saul's sin. They demanded seven of Saul's sons be handed over to them to be killed and impaled on the mountain of the Lord. David handed over five of Saul's grandsons and two of his sons. The cycle of violent vengeance and counter-vengeance resulted in many deaths.

Within this story we meet the prostrate, grieving figure of one whose name is not often on our lips – Rizpah. She was a woman of no power, left alone by the death of her husband Saul, a powerless commodity whom nobody wanted. Rizpah was a concubine, wife of Saul, whose two sons David handed over to the Gibeonites. Her grief took her to a mountain above where the bodies of her sons lay, and there she lived on sackcloth spread on a rock for five months until David was so moved he gathered the bones and give them an honourable burial. Rizpah, the pawn in a game of vengeance and counter-vengeance, took to herself a different power, the power of living out the past in a different way. It is such power that forgiveness offers to the destructive alternative that is vengeance (2 Samuel 21.1-14).

### **forgiving and being forgiven**

It is not helpful to seek to be prescriptive about the when and how of forgiveness. To attempt to be prescriptive may well add another burden to the backs of people who are already burdened with hurt. Forgiveness is a lifestyle to which we aspire rather than a duty we perform. It is not a matter of ticking the necessary boxes but a matter of developing a heart yearning after Christlikeness.

The underlying thesis of this paper is perhaps too simple, and perhaps too complex. It is the belief that in the moment we are sinned against we are caught up in the tragedy of sin. This tragedy is that as the church we can no longer take up the powerful ground of giving or holding back forgiveness. Rather, we stand on the common ground of both needing to forgive and needing to be forgiven.

In the churches we have laboured long on sin. We have laboured on sin because it separates us from God, because to do so convinces us of the seriousness of matters to do with God and eternity and because it keeps us humble. People of every denomination are willing to claim that theirs, more than any other, has been experienced in inducing guilt within its people. All denominations have been strong on the responsibility for sin and weak on the tragedy of sin. It is as much, if not more, because of the tragedy of sin as the responsibility for sin that we need to develop practices of forgiveness. To look again at sin and see its tragic dimensions frees the church from unnecessary self-righteous judgement of the world. It permits the church to stand with the world on the common ground that the good we sought to do was what we failed to do and the evil we so longed to avoid was exactly what we ended up doing.

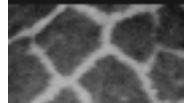
The experience of the world is often of a paternalistic church that thought it knew the answers without ever knowing the questions. While this

judgement may feel harsh and unfair, the churches have to be open to the possibility that there is truth in it. Across peace lines there is little trust and little hope. It is perhaps timely for the churches to reflect that we have built our own peace lines between one another. As long as we live within our respective domains there is a peace of sorts. But when we venture around the other side it comes as a shock to us to discover that we may not be recognised at all. We too have sinned and fallen far short of the glory of God who sent Jesus to destroy the barriers. In this sense we are the world, sharing the common ground of needing to receive and to give forgiveness.

The practice of forgiveness can only function in the context of relationship. Good relationships are, therefore, a matter for the churches within denominations, between denominations and with the world. It is a matter of the utmost importance; for the measure with which we forgive is reflected in the measure by which we are forgiven, and forgiveness is crucial for our growing, living relationship with God.

**notes**

1. 'Peelers' is an expression used in Northern Ireland to refer to the Police.
2. The issues raised here about truth, biblical foundations and interpretation and the like are matters for another paper. Here I simply want to state a broad principle, what I understand to be the biblical principal of unity in diversity, by which I aspire to live.
3. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1958) p.237.



**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  
 www.forgiveness-institute.org  
 website.lineone.net/~andrewhdknock/index.html

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Lesley Carroll is originally from Coalisland in county Tyrone. She has worked in North Belfast for 18 years, the last 4 years and 6 months of which have been spent as minister of Fortwilliam Park Presbyterian Church.

*receiving the forgiveness papers:*

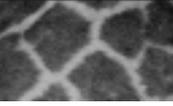
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