

# The Craft of Forgiveness

## I. Introduction

While preparing this segment, I watched with fellow congregants *Babette's Feast*, winner of the Academy Award for best foreign-language film in 1987.

The film is a rich kaleidoscope of themes. One is how a community of the faithful renews itself after falling into pious routine over the years, a kind of lifeless orthodoxy and broken relationships. The simple answer is, they discover a larger vision of life through the sacrament of "Babette's feast", a lavish "communion meal" that points beyond themselves to God, love, and restoration of relationships.

In short, they offer and receive forgiveness from God and one another. The film ends with a spontaneous dance of the renewed fellowship under a starry sky, its final words a heart-felt "Hallelujah": *Praise the Lord!*

Forgiveness is not only the ultimate "craft" for all wishing to become fully human, it is also ticket to freedom and joy.

Luke Johnson, theologian, says the greatest act of forgiveness must be towards our fathers (or parents, one could add). Simone Weil, 20<sup>th</sup> century French intellectual and mystic, says the greatest act of forgiveness must be towards God. Another huge area of forgiveness must be towards ourselves.

In Clint Eastwood's film, *Unforgiven*, through the violent genre of the Western which made him famous, he explores what happens to people when forgiveness is not offered, repentance for sins not made. The film unravels in a violent shoot-out at the end, where there is no redemption. It is a depiction of invariable violence elicited when one is in a state of unforgiveness.

*Personal Inventory:*

1. Whom do you most need to forgive?
2. Whom do you most need to ask for forgiveness?
3. What steps can you take towards this as you proceed with this study?

*Caveat:*

However, Wilma Derksen, who lost her daughter to kidnapping and murder, and has since become a major leader in the Canadian Victims movement, has warned repeatedly against cheap forgiveness like "cheap grace". She says that Christians should never foist the forgiveness word upon victims. Victims must discover that themselves, and only after working through at least fifteen elements of healing. Otherwise, "forgiveness"

becomes an “F” word.

Wilma wrote about her daughter’s murder in *Have You Seen Candace?* She wrote also about the fifteen elements of healing in *Confronting the Horror*. The subtitle of her book about Candace is, “A True Story of Faith and Forgiveness”. But this was a hard-won forgiveness. At one point in her book about Candace she tells of having tea with a close friend not long after the funeral service. Her friend asked her in the secure intimacy of that encounter, “What would be justice for you?” She found that her mind’s camera began to imagine no less than ten child murderers lined up for execution. And she would pull the trigger, one by one. As she did, and watched each drop lifeless to the ground with their hoods falling loose, she looked up and suddenly saw ten families like hers weeping unbearably from their loss. “But that doesn’t satisfy”, she heard herself saying, “I think our choice to forgive is the right one. (Derksen, 1991, pp. 224ff).” She adds: “By forgiving we can transcend the hurt and choose to be loving again (p. 227).”

*Questions:*

1. Must victims forgive to remain faithful Christians? If yes or no, why?
2. What does “forgiving” mean for Wilma Derksen in the brief part of her story recounted here? What does it mean for you?

*Personal Inventory:*

1. If you are a crime victim, are you able even to consider offering forgiveness?
2. If you are a victim, how might you be helped by the church on your journey towards wholeness?
3. Whom can you trust to ask for help to move towards healing?

## **II. Embodying Forgiveness**

In a profound theological analysis of forgiveness entitled *Embodying Forgiveness*, Gregory Jones writes, “Most fundamentally, then, forgiveness is not so much a word spoken, an action performed, or a feeling felt as it is an embodied way of life in an ever-deepening friendship with the Triune God and with others (Jones, 1995, p. xii).”

### A. Scripture

Read Matthew 6:9 – 15; Matthew 18:21 - 35

*Questions:*

1. On what does God’s forgiveness towards us depend, according to The Lord’s Prayer? Read also Mark 11:25.

2. Look briefly at Lamech's boast in Genesis 4:23-24. "*Lamech said to his wives, 'Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.'*" Then look at Exodus 21:23-25. "*But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.*" Finally, look at Matthew 18:21 and 22. "*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'*"

What kind of progression in response to wrongs is going on from ancient neareastern culture, to Mosaic Law, to Jesus' New Covenant directed to the church?

3. Towards whom do we need to practise this kind of forgiveness? Take inventory.

Read Ephesians 4:29 – 32 and Colossians 3:12 – 14.

*Questions:*

1. What is the standard set for our acts of forgiveness to the other?
2. What overall virtue aids us in pursuit of forgiveness, and what does that mean?
3. What would it look like were we to "go and do likewise"? Think very concretely of your own situation right now.

Read Luke 6:37 – 38

*Questions:*

1. Jesus gives a series of pithy instructions. Are they all tied into one another?
2. Reflect on: What is the "measure" you use in your relationships? Think about family, friends, co-workers, church family, neighbours, enemies near (criminals, the sexually immoral, etc.), enemies afar (terrorists, etc.)

## B. A Story

Read the following story told by Father Thomas Hopko, an Orthodox theologian, to illustrate forgiveness. As you read it, think also of Gregory Jones' comment: "I argue that what God is in God's very being – namely the Trinitarian communion of self-giving love – human beings are called to grow into in response to the costly forgiveness of Christ (*ibid*, p. xv)."

Contemporary interpretations of the commandment in the Torah reflect this individualistic attitude. The first commandment is that you love God with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your

strength, and the second is that you love your neighbor as yourself. The only way you can prove you love God is by loving your neighbor, and the only way you can love your neighbor in *this* world is by endless forgiveness. So, “love your neighbor as yourself.” However, in certain modern editions of the Bible, I have seen this translated as, “you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.” But that’s not what it says.

I once had a discussion with someone on a Sunday-morning television program about this. We were asked what we thought was most important in Christianity, and part of what I said was that the only way we can find ourselves is to deny ourselves. That’s Christ’s teaching. If you try to cling to yourself, you will lose yourself. And of course, the unwillingness to forgive is the ultimate act of not wanting to let yourself go. You want to defend yourself, assert yourself, protect yourself, and so on. There is a consistent line through the Gospel—if you want to be the first you must will to be the last, and so on. And the other fellow, who taught the psychology of religion at one of the Protestant seminaries, said, “What you are saying is the source of the neuroses of Western society. What we need is healthy self-love and healthy self-esteem.” And then he quoted that line, “you shall love your neighbor as *you love* yourself.” He insisted that you must love yourself first and have a sense of dignity. If one has that, however, forgiveness is then either out of the question or an act of condescension toward the poor sinner. It is no longer an identification with the other as a sinner, too. I said that of course if we are made in the image of God it’s quite self-affirming, and self-hatred is an evil. But my main point is that there is no self there to be defended except the one that comes into existence by the act of love and self-emptying. It’s only by loving the other that myself actually emerges. And forgiveness is at the heart of that.

As we were leaving we saw a very old, venerable rabbi with a shining face. He called us over and asked if he could say something to us. “That line, you know, comes from the Torah, from *Leviticus*,” he said, “and it cannot possibly be translated ‘love your neighbor as you love yourself.’ What it says is ‘you shall love your neighbor as *being* your own self.’ -Your neighbor *is* your true self. You have no self in yourself.

After I heard this I started reading the Church Fathers in this light, and that’s what they all say. They say, “Your brother is your life.” I have no self in myself except the one that is fulfilled by loving the other. The Trinitarian character of God is a metaphysical absolute here, so to speak. God’s own self is another—his Son, to use Christian evangelical terms. The same thing happens on the human level; so the minute I don’t feel deeply that my real self is the other, then I’ll have no reason to forgive anyone. But if that is my reality, and my only real self is the other, and my own identity and fulfillment emerges only in the act of loving the other, that gives substance to the idea that we are potentially God-like beings. Now, if you add to that that we are all to some degree faulty, weak, and so on, that act of love will always be an act of forgiveness. That’s how I find and fulfill myself as a human being made in God’s image. Otherwise, I cannot. So the act of forgiveness is the very act by which our humanity is constituted. Deny that, and we kill ourselves. It’s a metaphysical suicide. (Excerpted from: *Parabola: The Magazine of Myth and Tradition*, “Forgiveness”, Volume XII, Number 3, August 1987, pp. 50 - 59.)

*Questions:*

1. Why does Hopko disagree with translating the Second Greatest Command as “Love your neighbour as you love yourself”? What about having healthy self-esteem?

2. What do you think about Hopko’s contradicting the “rugged individualism” of Western culture by asserting, “Your brother is your life.”? Read in this context Archbishop Desmond Tutu about the African understanding of *ubuntu*:

“*Ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human.... It is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.’ We belong in a bundle of life. We say, ‘A person is a person through other persons.’ It is not, ‘I think therefore I am.’ It says rather, ‘I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.’... Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* - the greatest good... To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. What dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanizes me. It gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them (p. 31).” “One such [universal] law is that we are bound together in what the Bible calls ‘the bundle of life.’ Our humanity is caught up in that of all others. We are humans because we belong. We are made for community, for togetherness, for family, to exist in a delicate network of interdependence. Truly ‘it is not good for man to be alone,’ [Genesis 2:18] for no one can be human alone. We are sisters and brothers of one another whether we like it or not and each one of us is a precious individual (Tutu, 1999, pp. 196 & 197).”

3. What does Hopko mean by: “So the act of forgiveness is the very act by which our humanity is constituted. Deny that, and we kill ourselves. It’s a metaphysical suicide.”

4. Do you feel fully human? Is forgiveness or its lack a factor in your response? What actions if any do you need to take?

5. Gregory Jones later in his book poses some questions, and makes a strong assertion:

How does forgiveness become a way of life encompassing the entirety of our lives? And how do we distinguish the habit of embodying forgiveness from specific occasions and situations when we have to discern whether or not to forgive, or whether forgiveness is even the appropriate response?

We should begin doing so by identifying forgiveness as a craft. The craft of forgiveness is a lifelong learning process that people are initiated into as apprentices to those who excel at the craft. Those

who excel have a moral authority as teachers, and apprentices must recognize a gap between their present competencies and genuine excellence (*ibid*, pp. 225 & 226).”

Who are the “Masters of Forgiveness” in your life after whom you can model yourself?

### C. Forgiveness in Politics

The State in most of Church history has been seen as mandated to do to the wrongdoer a vengeance that otherwise the individual Christian may not do. This has usually been called “punitive” or “retributive” justice. Romans 13:1 – 6 has been the classic text, especially verse 4. This section suggests alternatively that there is a unity between the personal and the political in biblical ethics, and that therefore God intends the state to “embody forgiveness” in its response to domestic and foreign enemies just like individual Christians are enjoined.

This is a huge topic to raise. Reformed theologian Hans Boersma, in a recent publication, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross* (Boersma, 2004), argues repeatedly that violence in Kingdom Come will be no more, but it is unfortunately part of Christian reality today. He writes: “God’s involvement in the cross seems to imply violence, and our imitation of Christ’s self-sacrifice may also lend itself to the perpetuation of violence (*ibid*, p. 119).” Yet again: “I argue that hospitality [love of neighbour/enemy] cannot be practiced without violence in the world as we know it; that the hospitality of the cross therefore necessarily involves (penal) violence... (*ibid*, p. 154)”

On the other hand, theologian Lee Griffith in *The War on Terror and the Terror of God* (2002) argues that the terror of God is none other than God’s peacemaking message of the Cross. He asks: “What would this mean if it were true that we love God only as much as the person we love least? Would it not mean that, when we have finally won the victory in our war on terrorism, when we have finally managed to exterminate all the thugs and Hitlers and terrorists, we will have expressed nothing so much as our total confidence in the death of God? (Griffith, 2002, p. 263)” This is the heart of Griffith’s sustained thesis that “the biblical concept of ‘the terror of God’ stands as a renunciation of all violence – and of death itself (*ibid*, inside front jacket cover).”

In Desmond Tutu’s book, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (1999), he tells the story of the work of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), 1995 to 1998. This became a state-sponsored example of forgiveness at the highest political level. The title of Chapter Two is: “Nuremberg or National Amnesia? A Third Way”. “Victor’s justice” as imposed by the Allies at the end of World War II left simmering resentment, since atrocities were committed on both sides. Simply forgetting the past, as in the case of the general amnesty negotiated by the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile upon the transition to civilian government, left atrocities entirely unaddressed. Tutu explains: “Our country’s negotiations rejected the two extremes and opted for a ‘third way’... And that third way was granting amnesty to individuals in exchange for a full disclosure relating to the crime for which amnesty was being sought (Tutu, 1999, p. 30).” The carrot was freedom in exchange for truth. The stick was prison.

Tutu asks about justice, since the repeated criticism of the TRC is it did not deliver such. The response is classic “restorative justice”, which includes forgiveness at the political level: the impersonal state is not the victim; justice is not retributive. Tutu writes: “We contend that there is another kind of justice, restorative justice, which was characteristic of traditional African jurisprudence. Here the central concern is not retribution or punishment. In the spirit of *ubuntu*, the central concern is the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships, a seeking to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he has injured by his offense... Thus we would claim that justice, restorative justice, is being served when efforts are being made to work for healing, for forgiving, and for reconciliation (*ibid*, pp. 54& 55).”

In Jean Bethke Elshtain’s book, *Just War Against Terror* (2003), she discusses restorative justice briefly. Elshtain acknowledges that even the murderer may not need execution in turn, but may be dealt with according to “several ‘just’ options (p. 130).” She comments rightly: “As a way to honor the cause of both justice and mercy, political restorative justice is shaped significantly by Christianity. The goal is civic peace marked by justice (Elshtain, 2003, p. 130).” But she adds immediately: “The value of this approach in dealing with not just one state’s internal efforts to build constitutional order but with relations between states is untested; political restorative justice seems likely, however, to fall prey to the classic dilemmas of international politics (*ibid*, p. 130).”

This is a regrettable conclusion. Several recent authors have argued for practices of forgiveness at the international level. A few are: Duane Friesen, *Christian Peacemaking and International Conflict: A Realist Pacifist Perspective*, (1986); Glen Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (1992); *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (1998); and Vern Neufeld Redekop, *From Violence to Blessing: How an Understanding of Deep-Rooted Conflict Can Open Paths to Reconciliation* (2002).

I shall however briefly discuss one other publication, by Donald Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (1995). He refers to forgiveness in politics as “revolt against the inertia of history” (Shriver Jr., 1995, p. 220). He states at the outset: “Slowly, over these years, I have arrived at the belief that the concept of forgiveness, so customarily relegated to the realms of religion and personal ethics, belongs at the heart of reflection about how groups of humans can move to repair the damage that they have suffered from their past conflicts with each other. Precisely because it attends at once to moral truth, history, and the human benefits that flow from the conquest of enmity, *forgiveness* is a word for a multidimensional process that is eminently political. The purpose of this book is to explore that process as it unfolds in some of the great traumatic events of twentieth-century human affairs (*ibid*, pp. ix and x).” He goes on to discuss forgiveness out of the American context between post-war Germany and the U.S., Japan and the U.S., and in racial tensions in the U.S. civil rights movement.

Shriver clearly defines forgiveness over against “forgive and forget” – two impossible “F” words when used together. “Forgiveness begins with memory suffused with moral judgment. Popular use of the word *forgiveness* sometimes implies that to forgive is to forget, to abandon primary concern for the crimes of an enemy. Quite the reverse: ‘Remember and forgive’ would be a more accurate slogan. Forgiveness begins with a remembering and a moral judgment of wrong, injustice, and injury (*ibid*, p. 7).”

He summarizes its multidimensionality: “Forgiveness in a political context, then, is an act that joins moral truth, forbearance, empathy, and commitment to repair a fractured human relationship. As such a multidimensional human action, forgiveness might be compared to a twisted four-strand cable, which over time intertwines with the enemy’s responses to form the double bond of new politics... So defined, political forgiveness links realism to hope. It aims at delivering the human future from repetitions of the atrocities of the past. Given the scale of politically engineered atrocity in the twentieth century, nothing could be a more practical or more urgent gift to our neighbors of the twentieth-first (*ibid*, p. 9).” We can add that September 11, 2001, that moved terrorism to a new level of consciousness in the world, and established a perpetual war on terror waged by the United States (and the West to some extent) worldwide, has extended this urgency dramatically.

Considering the political implications of New Testament teachings about forgiveness, Richard Hays writes: “This would mean, practically speaking, that Christians would have to relinquish positions of power and influence insofar as the exercise of such positions becomes incompatible with the teaching and example of Jesus. This might well mean, as [Stanley] Hauerwas has perceived, that the church would assume a peripheral status in our culture, which is deeply committed to the necessity and glory of violence. The task of the church then would be to tell an alternative story, to train disciples in the disciplines necessary to resist the seductions of violence, to offer an alternative home for those who will not worship the Beast. If the church is to be a Scripture-shaped community, it will find itself reshaped continually into a closer resemblance to the socially marginal status of Matthew’s nonviolent countercultural community (Hays, 1996, pp. 342 & 343).”

Hays adds, with reference to political love [forgiveness] of enemies: “One reason that the world finds the New Testament’s message of peacemaking and love of enemies incredible is that the church is so massively faithless. On the question of violence, the church is deeply compromised and committed to nationalism, violence, and idolatry. (By comparison, our problems with sexual sin are trivial.) This indictment applies alike to liberation theologies that justify violence against oppressors and to establishment Christianity that continues to play chaplain to the military-industrial complex, citing just war theory and advocating the defense of a particular nation as though that were somehow a Christian value (*ibid*, p. 343).”

A final study that looks at forgiveness politically is with reference to the state’s response to its domestic enemies, criminals. While there is no place to discuss the details, the church in the 11<sup>th</sup> century first taught the West to treat criminals like it treated religious heretics: *with harsh punishment*. Criminals for the last millennium became politically the counterpart to religious heretics – “social heretics”. This was a political application of



the satisfaction theory of the atonement first developed by St. Anselm of Canterbury in the 11<sup>th</sup> century that led to the development of a harsh, violent, punitive Western criminal justice system.

One theologian/historian of many writes: “For the Church Fathers, it is the devil who – illegitimately – insists on the payment of the debt incurred by humankind. Anselm inverts this. Now it is God who, legitimately, exacts the payment of debt... In both Old and New Testaments an indebted person could be ‘redeemed’ by the payment of his or her debt. Jesus, following Deuteronomy, insists on the cancelling of debt as a fundamental aspect of Christian practice. Anselm, however, makes God the one who *insists* on debt. The debt humanity has incurred must be paid with human blood. The God who rejected sacrifice now demands it... From the start sacrifice and satisfaction run together... The God who liberates from law is now, in Anselm, understood as hypostasised, personified law... What remains... is a mysticism of pain which promises redemption to those who pay in blood. In this move a most fundamental inversion of the gospel is achieved, which prepares the way for the validation of criminal law as the instrument of God’s justice instead of what it is in the gospel, an alienating construction which is at best a tragic necessity.

“The penal consequences of this doctrine were grim indeed. As it entered the cultural bloodstream, was imaged in crucifixions, painted over church chancels, recited at each celebration of the Eucharist, or hymned, so it created its own structure of affect one in which earthly punishment was demanded because God himself had demanded the death of his Son (Gorringe, 1996, pp. 102 & 103).” This highly punitive response to crime persisted in dominance in the Western church (and society) until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Christopher Marshall’s study, *Beyond Retribution* (2001) presents “a New Testament vision for justice, crime and punishment” that interprets punishment as a restorative, not a retributive, response to crime, like parents disciplining their children. This vision has become known as “restorative justice”. The final chapter of the book is entitled “Forgiveness as the Consummation of Justice”. The concluding words are: “Restorative justice cannot manufacture repentance and forgiveness. But by placing a concern for the healing of hurts, the renewal of relationships, and the re-creation of community at the heart of its agenda, it makes room for the miracle of forgiveness to occur and for a new future to dawn. Nothing could be more compatible with the message of the New Testament than this... [T]he New Testament looks *beyond retribution* to a vision of justice that is finally satisfied only by the defeat of evil and the healing of its victims, by the repentance of sinners and the forgiveness of their sins, the restoration of peace and the renewal of hope – a justice that manifests God’s redemptive work of making all things new (Marshall, 2001, p. 284).”

### *Questions*

1. Should Christians in a democracy like Canada with access to influencing the state’s use of power be advocates for forgiveness in politics internationally and domestically?

2. If Archbishop Desmond Tutu is right in arguing that there is no future without forgiveness in the political realm, how should the Canadian church in general, FBC in particular, nurture and encourage that kind of politics?
3. Would the church have to assume a peripheral status in our culture to hold out for a politics of forgiveness? On what political traditions does/might the church build for such a politics?
4. Is restorative justice the church's way to respond to crime? If so, how might FBC, and the wider church find practical ways of promoting this response?

#### D. Some Quotations About Forgiveness

(Thanks to the ForgivenessNet website at:  
<http://website.lineone.net/~andrewhdknock/index.html>)

#### *Personal Inventory:*

1. How can I change in my attitudes to others based on the following insights?
2. How can I nurture change in others based on these insights?

### **As we forgive**

Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have someone to forgive ... I am telling you what Christianity is. I did not invent it. And there, right in the middle of it, I find "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those that sin against us." There is no slightest suggestion that we are offered forgiveness on any other terms. It is made perfectly clear that if we do not forgive we shall not be forgiven. There are no two ways about it.

**C. S. Lewis** *Mere Christianity*, pp 101-2

### **Becoming a forgiving person**

It is my hypothesis that there are four stages on the journey to becoming a forgiving person ... In the first stage, people experience loss, feel angry or hurt, and tend to justify their negative emotions ... The second stage emerges when after feeling upset with someone for a while we realise that our hurt and anger does not feel good ... our bad feelings are not helping us ... In the third stage we remember how good it felt the last time we were able to forgive ... we are more in control.

The fourth stage of becoming a forgiving person is the most difficult and possibly the most powerful. At this stage you simply become a forgiving person. This stage comes as you make the decision to forgive first and let many troubling things go. As a forgiving person, you become resistant to taking offense. Your skin becomes tougher. You take

less personal offence, you are convinced that you are responsible for how you feel, and you tell stories that show you and other people in the light of your positive intention.

The fourth stage of forgiveness involves the choice to rarely if ever take offense. This does not mean that we condone unkindness. It does not mean we become a doormat. It means we save being upset only for situations where getting upset helps us. We do not take hurtful actions so personally, and we do not blame the offender for how we are feeling. At this stage we understand that people are not perfect and that we can expect them to hurt us at times.

**Fred Luskin** *Forgive for Good*, pp 179-183

### **Beginning to be free**

We must forgive those we feel have wronged us, not because they deserve to be forgiven, but because we love ourselves so much we don't want to keep paying for the injustice.

Forgiveness is the only way to heal. We can choose to forgive because we feel compassion for ourselves. We can let go of the resentment and declare, "That's enough! I will no longer be the Big Judge that goes against myself. I will no longer beat myself up an abuse myself. I will no longer be the Victim."

First, we need to forgive our parents, our sisters, our friends, and God. Once you forgive God, you can finally forgive yourself. Once you forgive yourself, the self-rejection in your mind is over ... That's the beginning of the free human. Forgiveness is the key.

**Don Miguel Ruiz** *The Toltec Path to Freedom* ("The Four Agreements", pp 114-5)

### **Being true to myself through forgiving**

I must practise unlimited forgiveness because, if I did not, I should be wanting in veracity to myself, for I would be acting as if I were not myself guilty in the same way as the other has been guilty towards me. Because my life is so liberally spotted with falsehood, I must forgive falsehood which has been practised upon me. Because I have been in so many cases wanting in love, and guilty of hatred, slander, deceit or arrogance, I must pardon any want of love, and all hatred, slander, deceit or arrogance which have been directed against myself ...

The struggle against the evil that is in mankind we have to carry on not by judging others but by judging ourselves. Struggle with oneself and veracity towards oneself are the means by which we work upon others.

**Albert Schweitzer** quoted in George Seaver, *Albert Schweitzer, Christian Revolutionary*, p 91

## **But will he sin again?**

The church cannot set false borders on grace. There are no limits on divine mercy toward penitent people. There are no boundaries on forgiveness. The church must discipline sin in its midst, but we cannot deny a penitent person, no matter how serious his sin may have been. Someone might protest, “But we want to make sure he will never do it again.” We cannot have that assurance. If he sins seventy times seven, we must forgive him that many times. Refusing to forgive is a sin, a sin that is doubly destructive to Christian joy, because it not only steals the original offender’s joy, but it also diminishes the joy of the one who is refusing to forgive. Failure to forgive ... is an extremely destructive kind of sin.

Forgiveness restores joy on both sides. It heals the breach caused by sin. It salves the sorrow of both offender and forgiver. And this should take place the moment the sinning one repents. As soon as there is repentance, the offender should be restored and strengthened, “lest such a one be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (2 Corinthians 2:7).

**John MacArthur** *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, pp 174

## **Campaigning against evil**

This is a difficult moment for the forgiveness movement. People around the world are at this very moment being asked to support what could become a permanent state of global war, rooted in the need to punish evildoers. While I certainly agree that we must try to prevent and restrain people from committing acts of violence, I am wary of President Bush’s new role as a theologian, pressing us to join a new campaign against evil around the world. Forgiveness is about starting over, not about getting even.

My first concern about the current campaign against evil is that ideas of the “evil other” can and do blind people to how they may have contributed to their own difficulties. In the current instance, Mr. Bush himself has already publicly acknowledged that American policy decisions played a central role in Afghanistan’s collapse into chaos and terrorism. Perspectives as varied as Buddhism, psychotherapy and biology would counsel us here that a large part of our survival power is the power to recognize our own mistakes, so that we can change our behavior and not repeat them ...

My second concern about a campaign against evil is that if we imagine our power to be only the power to out-bomb the evil bombers, out-shoot the evil shooters, and out-kidnap the evil kidnapers, then we will condemn ourselves to a national life focused primarily on violence, and we will become more and more like the people we have labelled as evil. Jesus set the example of this when he asked God to forgive those who were killing him. The issue was not the executioner’s worthiness of forgiveness. The issue, I believe, was that Jesus refused to join the haters in their hatred.

**Dennis Rivers** *A web page about forgiveness*, 2002

## Don't forgive too soon

As we begin to speak about forgiveness, I caution myself about speaking about it too soon, before we have appreciated evil's crushing burden in the lives and deaths of those who have suffered its most immediate impacts.

I am a fortunate Manhattanite who did not work last Tuesday in the World Trade Center.

I was not the father who phoned from a top floor to say goodbye to his wife and two small children. I am not the orphaned child of two parents massacred in Rwanda. Nor did my own government in Pol Pot's Cambodia widow me. Nor did my son disappear in a prison in pre-1990 Johannesburg. I have no right, therefore, to expect such victims of humanly enacted evil to turn soon to the possibility of forgiving those who have thus trespassed against them. As one who believes that the God and Father of Jesus means to heal this world of its sins, I must not lose touch with that belief.

As for translating it into the realm of our fractured human affairs, I must beware of calling anyone to forgive until I have struggled to appreciate the depth of their suffering, the depth of the evils which they suffer and which I have not yet had to suffer.

**Donald Shriver** speaking at Worcester, Mass. just after 11 September  
reprinted in *The Forgiveness We Need*, p. 4

## Field of Dreams

Movie producer **Stephen Simon** (including *The Electric Horseman*, *What Dreams May Come*, *Indigo*), the co-ordinator of The Spiritual Cinema Circle, included Phil Alden Robinson's much loved *Field of Dreams*, starring Kevin Costner, in his recent 5 Spiritual Cinema Classics. He ended his assessment with:

Movies that connect on such a deep level as *Field of Dreams* have powerful messages inside of them or we would not resonate so deeply to them. This film not only illuminates our connection to that voice within us, it also parts the veil between life and death with love and forgiveness at its core. In discovering what transpires at the end of the film, we understand the real reason that Ray's inner voice has compelled him to build the field: reconnection and forgiveness with his own deceased father. This theme resonates for us, I believe, on the obvious level of our desire for resolution with our parents but it also connects to the deeper issue of forgiveness.

The power of forgiveness is at once an immense power and also a formidable weapon. When we choose to forgive, we release both ourselves and the person that we are forgiving. Once the power to forgive is exercised, the energy shifts. When we withhold forgiveness, we keep ourselves and the one seeking forgiveness in the places we have

maintained as victim and perpetrator. We can, of course, hold grudges forever and keep ourselves in that place of the wronged party or we can forgive and move on. Choosing to forgive and being forgiven is at the core of the climax of *Field of Dreams*. Ray forgives his father and thus allows them both to heal. For everyone, that is a powerful and resonant message. For many more, it is a critical life lesson that we have chosen to play out in this lifetime.

## **Forgive and forget**

This expression has attained the status of a cliché. When we grant forgiveness, does that entail a promise to forget the offence completely? Yes and no. There is obviously no way to purge the memory of an offence. I've heard people suggest that God forgets our sins when he forgives. They usually cite Hebrews 8.12 and 10.17. But those verses don't say that God forgets our sins. They say he will not remember them. What's the difference? To forget something is to have no memory of it. Rather, he refuses to call our transgressions to mind. He promises not to bring them up. That is exactly what is involved in forgiveness. It is a promise not to remind the person of the offence. Jay Adams (in *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, p 25) characterises this as a three-fold promise: "You promise not to remember his sin by bringing it up to him, to others, or to yourself. The sin is buried."

**John F MacArthur** *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, pp 189-90

## **Forgiveness and justice**

Forgiveness is not to condone or minimize the awfulness of an atrocity or wrong. It is to recognize its ghastliness but to choose to acknowledge the essential humanity of the perpetrator and to give that perpetrator the possibility of making a new beginning. It is an act of much hope and not despair. It is to hope in the essential goodness of people and to have faith in their potential to change. It is to bet on that possibility. Forgiveness is not opposed to justice, especially if it is not punitive justice but restorative justice, justice that does not seek primarily to punish the perpetrator, to hit out, but looks to heal a breach, to restore a social equilibrium that the atrocity or misdeed has disturbed.

**Desmond Tutu** *interviewed by BeliefNet after 9/11*

## **The line between good and evil**

It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. Even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained; and even in the best of all hearts, there remains a small corner of evil.

### **We liars who pray “Forgive us our debts ...”**

I suppose that the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6.12) - or “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” - has made liars out of more people than any document in human history ...

This petition is both a plea for forgiveness and a claim that we have already forgiven those who have hurt us. In an equivalent section, Luke 11.4, Jesus says, “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.” There it is in the present tense, claiming that we are forgiving everyone ... I have a suspicion that there are many who do need this teaching – and some who need it desperately.

**T. R. Kendall** *Total Forgiveness*, pp 66-7

### **The highest expression of love**

If we love only those who love us, we are doing nothing extraordinary. We do not need Christ to do that. A non-believer is quite capable of doing as much. Do you want to follow Christ, and not look back? Then are you going to make your way through life with a heart that is reconciled? In any disagreement, what is the use of trying to find out who was wrong and who was right? Suppose people distort your intentions? If you are judged wrongly because of Christ, then forgive. You will find that you are free, free beyond compare. Forgive, and then forgive again. That is the highest expression of loving. There you make yours the final prayer of Jesus, “Forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.”

**Brother Roger of Taizé** *No Greater Love*, pp 19, 22

### **The greatest offence**

“An offender can be punished. But to punish and not to restore, that is the greatest of all offences ... If a man takes unto himself God’s right to punish, then he must also take upon himself God’s promise to restore.”

**Alan Paton** *Too Late the Phalarope*, pp 264-5

### E. Conclusion

There is a distinct movement in the Judeo-Christian texts from endless retaliation to limitless offer of forgiveness. There is no distinction biblically between *personal* and *state* ethics. *Christians may not* call on the government to do an end-run around what

Jesus calls Christians to in response to neighbour and enemy. There is not a *private religious* realm of Christian responsibility, and a *collective secular* counterpart in which violent prohibitions of the former against neighbour/enemy are cast off. “*This is my Father’s world*” indivisibly. There is no ethical dualism. The first great anti-Christian watershed in Western Christianity was its Constantinian break with the (predominant) non-violence of Jesus: *Christ the Power of God*. The second great anti-Christian watershed was the Enlightenment’s break with the truth of Jesus: *Christ the Wisdom of God*. The former unfaithfulness in ethics during the fourth century paved the way for the latter apostasy in belief during the sixteenth century. This is Paul’s theme in I Corinthians 1:18 – 31.

It is impossible to imagine the different Western moral and intellectual history there might have been had Christians *en masse* lived up to the staggering biblical call: *Love your neighbour; love your enemies*.

Historian C. J. Cadoux, in an Epilogue to his study of the pre-Constantinian church, *The Early Church and the World* (1925 & 1955), says of the early church era: “... we certainly have a moral reformatory movement on a scale and with a potency unparalleled at any other epoch before or since... the achievements of the early Church can defy comparison with those of any other moral or religious movement known to history (p. 611)<sup>1</sup>.”

But this powerful effect upon the *polis* (surrounding culture) was achieved without Christians’ having had even a legal standing within the Roman Empire! It was done from the position of weakness and political powerlessness, when collective forgiveness was indeed a significant moral force wielded by Christians.

René Girard according to many is the greatest contemporary cultural theorist of the origins of violence, which origins arise from a “scapegoating” dynamic common to all human cultures, based upon “mimetic desire” known to all humanity<sup>2</sup>. He explains in an interview: “The third great moment of discovery for me was when I began to see the uniqueness of the Bible, especially the Christian text, from the standpoint of the scapegoat theory. The mimetic representation of scapegoating in the Passion was the solution to the relationship of the Gospels and archaic cultures. In the Gospels we have the revelation of the mechanism that dominates culture unconsciously (Williams, 1996, p. 263).”

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<sup>1</sup> Such a claim could likewise be made concerning the church growth of this time. This is one reason, incidentally, why so much “Church Growth” witnessing today seems to be, to steal a phrase from *Sojourners* magazine, ‘evangelism without the Gospel’. For what shall it profit one to evangelize the whole world, and never demonstrate the Gospel of forgiveness? In our evangelistic efforts are people really being called to a *metanoia* in their behaviour? If instead only some kind of mere change of belief is in view, quite abstract and highly individualistic, *is this Christian conversion at all?* While there is a need for a change of belief, this is barely the beginning of the matter - certainly not in Jesus! It seems such minimalist Christianity arises from a footnote theology of John 3:16 that reads: “Except out enemies!” after “For God so loved the world”, “whoever believes”, and “shall not perish”.

<sup>2</sup> *The Genealogy of Violence: Reflections on Creation, Freedom, and Evil*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, by Charles K. Bellinger is the best text explaining Girard’s understanding.



Girard suggests that Christians should work from the Bible to challenging myth and culture. Walter Wink in his trilogy on the Powers, in particular *Engaging the Powers* (in which he incidentally devotes a whole chapter to Girard) is an illustration of this. Wink begins his study: “Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world.... Violence is so successful as a myth precisely because it does not seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It is what works (Wink, 1992, p. 13).” His entire study is a challenge to what he calls “the myth of redemptive violence” which dominates the world like no other.

The biblical text, in a travail of discovery and rejection of the “scapegoating mechanism” in the Hebrew Bible, climaxed in the story of Jesus who eschewed all violence and all “domination systems”, to use Wink’s term.

But the irony is, the Gospels themselves have now come under attack as sources of scapegoating and demonization. They are seen for instance as the ultimate generation of anti-Semitism, oppressive patriarchy, and scapegoating violence in direct contradiction to their reality. American Episcopalian Bishop John Spong for representative instance, whose most recent book is entitled *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love*, demonstrates in all his writings a virulent intolerance towards Christian Scripture befitting the worst of the “fundamentalists” he excoriates! “We go on persecuting,” Girard says, “but in our world everybody persecutes in the name of being against persecution; that’s what we call propaganda. We have our own scapegoats, but they are always the people who make scapegoats, and we never persecute directly anymore (Hamerton-Kelly, 1987, p. 142).”

So Girard responds to an interviewer’s comment, “To take the Gospels seriously in the way you do is extremely difficult.”, with “It is difficult because it is too simple. Everything that happened to Jesus is happening to the texts of revelation themselves. This scapegoating of the Gospel texts is probably a necessary - but not excusable - phase that we are going through. It is a form of ingratitude toward God, and one should say so, boldly (Williams, p. 264).” This is reminiscent of Jesus’ words: “Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! (Matt 18:7).” For it is a participation in the violence of the world upon which all culture is founded, a violence that first of all crucified the Lord of Glory, and now seeks to cover the murder by expelling the very and only text that teaches humanity definitively that all such murder and violence are wrong!

Gil Bailie summarizes René Girard on violence thus: “The Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel did not say that the greatest commandment was to *believe* in God and love humanity. He did not say that we should be nice to one another because that’s the way God would like us to behave. He said the first and most essential thing is to *love God* with a paramount love. It is the most hackneyed notion in the world, but once or twice in a lifetime its dulling familiarity vanishes, and one feels for a moment the unfathomable significance and centrality of Jesus’ suggestion for breaking the grip of sin and death: *to love God*. Partly due to the humanists’ romantic idea of basic human benevolence and partly to the

rationalistic “where-there’s-a-will-there’s-a-way” spirit of the Enlightenment, the modern world came to believe that it could fulfill the requirements of the second commandment without having to bother with the first. We moderns came to believe, in effect, that, by itself, the second commandment was a civilizing force sufficient to the task at hand (Bailie, 1995, p. 272)”.

Conversely however, we Christians where the state is concerned believed we could fulfill the first commandment without reference to the second.

In many ways, René Girard’s project is an extended commentary on I Corinthians 1:18 - 31, a passage which in turn anticipates as mentioned the two great watersheds of the Christian era: the Constantinian Embrace of the Christian Church; and the Enlightenment. In the former case, the Church definitively took up violence as its *modus operandi*, moving from the position, *ecclesia abhorret a sanguine* (“the church abhors the shedding of blood”) to *in hoc signo vinceres* (“in this sign [of the *labarum*] you will conquer” – Constantine’s cry in battle). In the latter instance, the church began to accept, as Enlightenment proponent Gotthold Ephraim Lessing taught, that there was indeed an “ugly broad ditch between the accidental truths of history [Christian revelation], and the necessary truths of reason [culturally dominated definitions of truth].” Over against a culture unable to accept Christ as “the truth”, Girard presents Jesus Christ as the Wisdom of God who alone is able to liberate us from the cultural snares of scapegoating violence. And over against a world and a Christian tradition bathed in violence at its very core, and fundamentally opposed to Christ as “the way”, Girard presents Jesus as Stumblingblock (Greek, *skandalon* - a model/obstacle in Girard’s understanding) to the Powerful who only know violence as the ultimate resort, and therefore repeatedly crucify the Lord of Glory in endless persecutions (“prosecutions” domestically in violent punishment of criminals, internationally in war). To embrace Christ in this context is indeed to discover Jesus as ultimately “the life”, which all of us are offered “abundantly (John 10:10 and 14:6).”

A *litmus test* in science sees litmus paper turn red in acid solutions and blue in alkaline solutions. There is biblically a *mathematics of forgiveness* whose “scientific formula” goes like this:

*The litmus test of love of God is love of neighbour* (Matthew 22:36 – 40). *The litmus test of love of neighbour is love of enemy* (Matthew 5:38 – 48; Luke 6:27 – 36). *Failure to love the neighbour/enemy is to that extent failure to love God* (I John 4:20).

Differently put: failure to forgive from our heart *personally* is brokenness in relationship to God (Matthew 6:15); failure to practise forgiveness *collectively* through the state is likewise brokenness towards God (Romans 13:8 – 10, a text to be read in context of Paul’s allusion to “governing authorities (Greek: *exousiais*)” (Romans 13:1 – 7), and of the primary early church text of resistance to the “authorities (Greek: *exousias*)” (Ephesians 6:12 – 18), and ultimately of rejection of the violence of the state as “Beast” in Revelation 13.

The Apocalypse's War of the Lamb in other words is paradoxically God's forgiveness so forcefully enacted that the most resistant have their feet held to the fire of hell by God. But what is the fire of hell, biblically?: "It is upon the least lovable people that God heaps the burning coals of love (Romans 12:20 – 21). This is the terror of God. This is the fire of hell, the eternal torment. Those who would reject all love are forced to endure it... It is God who crosses the chasm. It is God who decides to go to hell armed with the burning coals of love... This is the terror of God from which we cannot hide because, in Jesus, God invades not only the earth but hell itself. God is the one who decides to go to hell. Hallelujah and amen (Griffith, 2002, pp. 184 & 185)."

In the end, failure of appropriation and practise of the wildly liberating New Testament word of forgiveness from God/to others *means we're stuck in hell – which is entirely of our own choosing*. To this Jesus' word is arresting: "For I tell you that unless your righteousness [*practice of forgiveness*] surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20 – compare Matthew 6:14 & 15).

Forgiveness is, bar none, *the* life craft of the Christian; the only ticket out of hell.

Hallelujah and amen!

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