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The triune God and the dynamic of forgiveness in the body of Christ

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Abstract

How much do we learn about God and about forgiveness when we are dealing with betrayal, infidelity and sin in the Body of Christ? This article argues that the forgiveness that God offers when confession derives from real self-knowledge is properly regarded as healing. And that healing is the restoration of balance in that sense that it will enable the minister to receive forgiveness and to begin a new phase of his spiritual journey, teaching the people about real forgiveness and sharing with them the painful journey of forgiveness.

Keywords: God, forgiveness, Church, ministry

Introduction

Most people would agree that the issue of forgiveness is a very difficult one. As Bishop B. F. Westcott expressed it “nothing

superficially seems simpler than forgiveness, whereas nothing if we look deeply is more mysterious or more difficult.”¹

It is a mysterious experience because as Mary Ann Coate puts it: “Forgiveness has its origin in the religious dimension”.

No doubt for someone who does not share a religious framework for life, the experience of forgiveness does not have the religious dimension² and in consequence he may regard the experience superficially. Other people think that such an experience is exclusively the business of the Church and church ministers. As someone said in a radio program: “The job of the Church is to make people feel guilty”. As far as I am concerned I think such a statement is rather a simplistic one and reveals the confusion about this subject. Nevertheless, to use one of the interesting observations of Mary Ann Coate, forgiveness has “ordinary human currency in our time”.³

Certainly we can find in the media almost weekly topics dealing with the experience of forgiveness. Titles like: “How can I forgive my husband’s infidelity”⁴ would be representative of, such

1. Quoted in J. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (IVP Books, 2006)., 110.

2. M.A. Coate, *Sin, Guilt and Forgiveness* (London: SPCK, 1989)., xii.

3. *Ibid.*, xiii.

4. How can I forgive my husband infidelity, (*Daily Mail*, Thursday January 30, 1997, 7).

ordinary human experience. Under this title, three different letters were published to stress the difficulty of forgiveness even in such common experiences. Each person described in dramatic words the experience through which they had gone. For example, one wrote that she was devastated after her husband admitted that for a year he had been having an affair . They described the emotions they went through like: anger, hurt, disbelief. The conclusion of one letter was that the offended person was “bound to go through a grieving process which lasted at least a year.”

“...My husband wants me to forgive and forget and because I love him so I want to. However, I feel tormented by his deceit...”⁵

These examples make us ask questions like: Why is it so difficult to forgive? What is really involved in the very common act of forgiveness? Where is the source for our forgiveness? Is it possible to “extrapolate from our human experience of forgiveness some understanding of the forgiveness of God?”⁶

How easy would it be for a minister who has deceived his wife, to receive forgiveness from his Church? How does forgiveness work in this case?

5. How can I forgive my husband infidelity, (*Daily Mail*, Thursday January 30, 1997, 7).

6. *Ibid.*, xiii.

This essay is an attempt to explore the dynamic of forgiveness in our human relationships and how a Christian understanding of the image of God could help us in giving and receiving forgiveness. There is also a deeper pastoral dimension.

There are many examples of pastors who were themselves in difficult life situations when they have failed and were in desperate need of forgiveness. Who will offer absolution for them, as an assurance of God's forgiveness?

Unfortunately the history of such experiences tells us that forgiveness in these circumstances is particularly difficult. The failure of a pastor has tremendous consequences not just for his family but also for the church, the larger family of Christians. For this reason I agree with James Emerson who says that we as pastors have to help our churches to discover the reality of the dynamic of forgiveness. Otherwise the church will be irrelevant for the crisis of this age.⁷

The same challenge comes from David Atkinson who writes: "The task of the Christian community is to enable us to learn how to forgive and accept forgiveness".⁸ To help us explore

7. J.G. Emerson, *Dynamics of Forgiveness* (Westminster Press, 1964), 26.

8. D.J. Atkinson, *Pastoral Ethics: A Guide to the Key Issues of Daily Living* (Lynx Communications, 1994), 27.

the nature of forgiveness in the body of Christ I propose to consider first : the nature of forgiveness.

1. The nature of forgiveness

What does forgiveness mean in our personal experience?

James Emerson in his approach to the human experience of forgiveness says that things like language, terms and meanings change, but human experience is the same.⁹ Engaging with the same question, Mary Ann Coate points out that “forgiveness at human level seems to be born of personal need; a need to feel better inside, to become free of inner forces which threaten to poison us”.¹⁰ The problem with her assumption, as she herself writes, is that not all human beings appear to have this need or sometimes “it takes a long time for it to surface”.¹¹

Therefore we have to accept the case that we cannot be forgiven if the person does not want to forgive us. Nonetheless, we should accept that there is still the possibility for us to forgive someone else, even if that person does not acknowledge it. But, in this situation, there are strong arguments to affirm that the process

9. Emerson, *Dynamics of Forgiveness.*, 27

10. Coate, *Sin, Guilt and Forgiveness.*, 75.

11. *Ibid.*, 75.

of forgiveness is incomplete. Since the aim of forgiveness is reconciliation there has to be a specific act of forgiveness from both sides. As Mary Ann Coate put it : “both parties must feel the need for forgiveness and want it”.¹²

It is worth noting at this point a metaphor borrowed by Paul Fiddes from Mackintosh which develops the whole doctrine of Atonement in a modern way of thinking. Dr. Fiddes uses the metaphor of “the journey of forgiveness” to illustrate the cross as a creative act in the image of atonement. He affirms that:

“this act is a past event with power to change human attitudes to God and to each other in the present; this creativity is at the very heart of forgiveness, as can be seen if we reflect upon what it involves in human relationships”.¹³

This metaphor offers a new perspective on the human experience of forgiveness. Certainly in this new picture forgiveness appears to be not just a simple state or feeling but a complex process. Through this process the forgiver is enabled to enter by “passionate imagination and self projection into the other’s conflict, to hold by intercession his faltering hand, to weep with his sorrow, actual-

12. Ibid., 75.

13. P.S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1989)., 172, 173.

ly to think about himself still at the other's side in the misery and loneliness of guilt".¹⁴

As we noticed before, reconciliation is impossible unless both parties risk themselves in the "voyage of anguish".¹⁵ Once engaged in this movement each part becomes vulnerable and exposes itself to change. The offender has to take the "voyage of sorrow and repentance towards the person he has hurt".¹⁶ On the other hand the forgiver himself also needs to embark on a "voyage of empathy". In this case the voyage is perhaps more difficult. This could be "an experience of the sacrificial pain of vicarious suffering"¹⁷ for the forgiver.

None the less, as Mackintosh, quoting Denney, has written: "there is no such experience in the relations of human beings as a real forgiveness which is painless, cheap or easy. There is always passion of penitence on the one side and the more profound passion of love on the other..."¹⁸

Life experience reveals to us that when human relations are broken between partners in families or between friends, the one

14. H.R. Mackintosh, *Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (Kessinger Pub, 2003), 188.

15. *Ibid.*, 188.

16. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement.*, 172.

17. Mackintosh, *Christian Experience of Forgiveness.*, 188.

18. *Ibid.*, 187.

who is suffering the most is often the forgiver. He or she must live with the injury and the shame throughout the years. However, as we all know very well, human beings are imperfect therefore even the forgiver needs to be forgiven. The one who takes the initiative of reconciliation has to be prepared to pay the cost because there are a lot of “blockages” in restoring a broken relationship.

I agree with Mackintosh when he says that in every great act of forgiveness a great agony is enshrined.¹⁹

Certainly the power of forgiveness is to be found in the agony of suffering. In other respects forgiveness is not merely a requirement for the individual with regard to himself, but also a requirement for the individual in relation to others. It follows that forgiveness is necessary both for the forgiver and for the offender, since that is the only way that true reconciliation take place.

Explaining the dynamic of the journey of forgiveness, Paul Fiddes points out two important phases in this movement. He identifies the first stage as an active stage for both parties ,the forgiver as well as the offender. At this stage the journey has a sense of adventure because both parties are engaged in what he calls “a voyage of discovery”. He suggests the complexity of this stage by the fact that the forgiver has to go to the “point of identification

19. Ibid., 216.

with the feelings of the offender".²⁰ The scene here reveals the dynamic entry by passionate imagination and self projection of the forgiver into the offender's internal conflict. On the other hand the offender must himself engage in a movement of discovery. I would like to suggest that this represents the encounter of the offender with a live memory. Indeed confronting the past through memory is inevitable at this stage. As most people dealing with forgiveness agree, such confrontation can be the first step towards forgiveness. Nevertheless, they will also agree that confrontation is not possible too soon. As an example we could think here about abused people. The offender in this case can be described as a torturer and the forgiver as the victim. In such cases, only the survivor can tell if he or she is prepared for this confrontation. As far as the abuser is concerned he has to face his actions and to take responsibility for them. He cannot expect "easy" forgiveness.

However, in such cases forgiveness is often seen as an essential part of the *healing process*. Hillary Cashman points out this idea: "Forgiveness is often seen as a part of the healing process: healing of the abused person, in that it is supposed to help to free him from the past; and of the abuser, since it is supposed to help him to repent and change his ways."²¹ At this stage there is an im-

20. Paul S. Fiddes, *The Doctrine of God in Pastoral Theology* (MTh. in Applied Theology course, Michaelmas term, 1996, lecture 5).

21. H. Cashman, *Christianity and Child Sexual Abuse* (London: SPCK, 1993), 79.

portant role for the memory . We can sympathize with some feminist theologians when they stress the importance of memory in reconciliation, thinking specially of the victim role of women in society throughout history. The memory of suffering and oppression of all people, makes some people say that forgiveness must be rooted in such reality.

This common view of human forgiveness encapsulated in the universal expression “forgive and forget”, reveals a superficial understanding of forgiveness. To adopt the position of someone who pretends that forgiveness means forgetting could be dangerous to our psychological and spiritual health. Helmuth Thielicke, a German pastor who endured suffering under the Nazi regime has said: “One should never mention the words forgive and forget in the same breath. No, we will remember but in forgiving we no longer use the memory against others”.²² There are no dead memories to hide them. We have to deal with them in this “voyage of discovery”.

Another way of escaping memories is pretending that the offence did not really matter. In this circumstance, the person tries to push away the offence and hope for an inner peace and resignation.²³

22. R.J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (HarperOne, 1992)., 198.

23. Coate, *Sin, Guilt and Forgiveness.*, 80.

Instead of forgiveness the person finds isolation. Mary Ann Coate used an example of isolation to stress the necessity to face the strong and active feelings within us. She uses the example of the gay man, member in a Christian Church.

“For him there is only the way of withdrawal and isolation. In part this is because of the fear of being ostracised should he be found out. In part too, it is perhaps he can not face his strong and active feelings, they remain repressed ,pushed down out of sight and out of consciousness he can only feel shame, fear, and loneliness.”

As Paul Fiddes writes, we have to come to that point in our experience of forgiveness, where we can recognise that our good and bad feelings co-exist, in order to take responsibility for the damage we do to others through our feelings. “We begin to have a concern for the other and an ability to see the situation from the other’s point of view...” At this point we reach that level of maturity which helps us to see the power of love is greater than the power of the offence.

In the second stage of forgiveness the forgiver experiences “the journey of endurance”. At this stage the forgiver makes himself vulnerable because he is open to the hostility of the offender. When the forgiver takes the voyage of endurance opening to the hostility of the offender, identifying himself with the feelings of the offender, offering forgiveness, the law of retribution is broken. As someone put it :

“We are able to forgive in such a way because of the

supreme act of forgiveness at Golgotha, which once for all broke the back of the cycle of retaliation.”²⁴

Through the costly process of forgiveness the offender is released by the forgiver and is free to receive God’s Grace whereby the offence no longer separates. We now come to the second important question in this essay. How can engagement with God create human forgiveness?

2. The Triune God, the source of forgiveness

In order to begin to answer this question, I suggest we review some of the approaches what have been made. First Mackintosh, who appears to be very sure that “forgiveness has its ground and spring in God not in man”.²⁵ Secondly Paul Fiddes, suggests that: “the experience of forgiveness in human relationships helps to interpret God’s great offer of forgiveness to human beings, creating a new situation universally”.

I think these two affirmations, help us to understand the relation between human forgiveness and divine forgiveness. The importance of Mackintosh’s statement is the stress on the truth that God, the originator of all things, is the source of human forgiveness.

24. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home.*, 199.

25. Mackintosh, *Christian Experience of Forgiveness.*, 336.

The value of Dr Fiddes' affirmation is in the "extrapolation" of human experience of forgiveness to God's experience of forgiveness, which helps us to have a better understanding of the triune God who engages Himself in forgiving human beings. I would like to develop these two ideas further but we should note that some have reservations about such a process.

John Stott, is rather suspicious about such a possibility. He says:

"The fact is that the analogy between our forgiveness and God's is far from being exact... For us to argue: we forgive each other unconditionally, let God do the same to us betrays not sophistication but shallowness, since it overlooks the elementary fact that we are not God."²⁶

I think Stott could be suspected of a kind of superficiality here. His argument seems to be very simplistic. He says furthermore that we are private individuals and other people's misdemeanours are personal injuries. So he argues:

"God is not a private individual, however, nor is sin just a personal injury. On the contrary, God is himself the maker of the laws we break and sin is rebellion against Him."²⁷

The problem is that God appears in this picture, as well as in the whole classical theology as an isolated being and insensitive

26. Stott, *The Cross of Christ.*, 88.

27. *Ibid.*, 88.

to our sufferings. Therefore forgiveness, as Stott describes it, is not a journey of empathy with our sufferings but rather a legal pardon, in which the justice of God is somehow satisfied in the death of Christ. That makes him understand forgiveness as “constituted by the inevitable collision between divine perfection and human rebellion, between God as He is and us as we are.”

Consequently Stott is concerned to answer the traditional dilemma: How can God express his holy love in forgiving sinners without compromising his holiness, and his holiness in judging sinners without frustrating his love?²⁸ The answer given by him is the cross of Christ, where divine mercy and justice “were equally expressed and eternally reconciled. God’s holy love was satisfied.”

I suppose that for all Christians the cross is God’s universal answer to our human problems. But the explanation given by the classical view of atonement does not satisfy all Christians. Mackintosh, for example, points out very well the confusion in the legal understanding of forgiveness.²⁹ He suggests that the old misconception of forgiveness divided the nature of God against itself, by deriving forgiveness from love and the punitive consequences of sin from righteousness.³⁰ His strong argument in sustaining this

28. *Ibid.*, 88.

29. Mackintosh, *Christian Experience of Forgiveness.*, 23.

30. *Ibid.*, 25.

idea is based upon the essence of love. He says: "Love that is worthy to be called love confronts the evil thing with an inevitable and intrinsic purity". Moreover, as we encounter or practice it in our human affairs, forgiveness is an active process in the mind and temper of the forgiver by means of which he abolished a moral hindrance to fellowship with the wrong doer, and re-established the freedom and happiness of friendship.³¹ If forgiveness is to God the "profoundest of problems" as Stott expressed it, then forgiveness has to be "emphatically more than ignoring a trespass" as Mackintosh argues.

In his paper to the B.C.C., Dr. Fiddes makes an important remark regarding the role of the cross in the salvation of God. He asks if the cross is a particular saving act of God, or simply the window upon a continual journey of love. He suggests in his answer that if we think of forgiveness as a healing journey into the experience of an offender, then it becomes clear that God has always been entering into human experience of death and alienation; He could not have done it for the first time at the cross.³²

31. Ibid., 28.

32. Paul S. Fiddes, *The Atonement and Trinity* (The Forgotten Trinity - a selection of papers presented to the BCC study commission on Trinitarian doctrine today, BCC/CCBI, London, 1991, 118).

This picture of God is very different from that of a Monarch who can be satisfied in some way and then is willing to offer legal pardon.

As we have seen already, forgiveness is more than legal pardon. Through the process of forgiveness the offender is won back into the circle of relationship. John V. Taylor, exploring the way in which God manifested his forgiveness throughout the history of the Old Testament, finds that there is always a place in Yahveh's thought for a "perhaps".

"The forgiveness of God is never in question; all that is uncertain is the human repentance, the return, which will open the door to that forgiveness and let reconciliation take effect."³³

In contrast with the traditional view of atonement, the modern view makes possible the extrapolation from human forgiveness to the divine experience of forgiveness. As Carr has said:

"Traditional doctrines of atonement are a source of deep dissatisfaction to almost all sensitive Christians. Their transactional character, whether expressed in terms of propitiation, substitution, or payment of a debt, make them an easy target of criticism. Yet the cross of Christ remains a powerful source of the experience of forgiveness and renewal."³⁴

33. J.V. Taylor, *The Christlike God* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 164.

34. A.W. Carr, *Angels and Principalities: The Background, Meaning and Development of the Pauline Phrase Hai Archai Kai Hai Exousiai* (Soc (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 114.

As we noticed above, one of the suggestions regarding the cross of Christ was to see it as a “window” which opens to us the inside of God’s being. If Paul Fiddes is right when he affirms that God has always been “voyaging” into his world, to share in human life, and I am sympathetic to this idea, then the cross is the event through which God is taking the longest journey into our human experience. It is in the cross, he says, where we can see clearly the “twofold journey of discovery and the endurance made by the triune God”.³⁵

Another helpful suggestion by Dr. Fiddes, is the idea that the cross could be understood as an “event” in God’s relational life.³⁶ This idea points out that God as the source of forgiveness has to be understood as the triune God, relating to our human experience of forgiveness. In this case, the cross is understood : “as making visible the triune relationships within God, disclosing a pain of separation and forsakenness to which God continually opens himself within his very being for the sake of the world”.³⁷

35. Paul S. Fiddes, *The Doctrine of God in Pastoral Theology*.

36. Paul S. Fiddes, *The Atonement and Trinity*, 107.

37. *Ibid.*, 107.