

THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO

DR. WAYNE WARD AND DR. PAUL SIMMONS

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY SEMINAR 8040

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

RON JOHNSON

JULY, 1987

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

I. BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

I was elected by my church to serve as chairperson of the personnel committee. The committee also functioned as the search committee of the church and the committee charged with all matters related to staff. As such, it was my responsibility to lead the committee through mundane matters as well as significant problems that faced staff. The larger responsibility of seeking new staff came during my tenure. We were called upon to seek a new pastor and later a minister of education. Years earlier the church had called its first minister of education. He was the second paid staff member. The church felt it had arrived with the addition of two full-time ministers. Later a minister of music was added.

The pastor resigned and a month later the minister of education resigned. The minister of music and an interim pastor took over all duties. Our committee was hard at work looking first for a new pastor. We succeeded in our task and with his consent proceeded to look for a minister of education.

I had been chosen to chair the committee because of my work in denominational life. I had more access to candidates for the committee's consideration than anyone else. I could also direct the committee to appropriate people for references and any history we as a committee might need. This had worked well with regard to the selection of our new pastor. We embarked upon the same process with regard to seeking anew minister of education. I contacted a trusted friend at the Sunday School Board where I had worked for five years and asked him for suggestions. He indicated the name of a person with whom he had been impressed.

I presented the information as I had it to the committee and they voted to secure a resume and to begin investigation. We contacted Bill (not his real name) and asked for a resume. Upon receipt of the resume I began to collect information for the committee. I called the Director of Mission where Bill served. I presented a verbatim of our conversation to the committee. I secured the names of other

references Bill had listed and asked other committee members to investigate and bring a report. These included fellow ministers and state leadership.

At a third meeting we talked about our findings which indicated positive feedback from Bill's references and our own research drawn from other sources. The committee felt a strong attraction to Bill and our prayer times were full of positive affirmation of our work.

We arranged a conference call with Bill. The committee talked by phone for more than forty-five minutes. After the call, the decision was made to pay for Bill and his wife to travel to our town for a formal interview. The committee was impressed with Bill's expertise and his deep spiritual commitment. Bill's wife was very supportive. The committee was excited. We presented Bill to the church the following Sunday as our candidate for the position, and he was elected with no opposition.

After working out the logistics of moving his family and the final details of housing arrangements, Bill left to go back and resign and to anticipate his move to our church. The committee breathed a sigh of relief. We had done a good job of calling a pastor and we were convinced that we had a winner with our new minister of education.

Although the church had gone through much change with regard to staff, there was a feeling of expectation and excitement over the new staff. For a period of months growth occurred at a rapid pace. Theologically the church had always been very conservative and had been known as the leader in the association in the number of baptisms. The church was outspoken on issues that affected the community such as liquor referenda and legalized gambling. There was a lot of pride reflected as members spoke of the church. But that would soon change.

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE

It was no exaggeration to say that everyone loved Bill. His personality was effervescent. My family grew close to Bill. He was a good person. He worked hard at the church. For two years Bill

worked day and night at the church. In fact, in committee meetings we commented on his hard work. He would bring his lunch and eat at his desk, working away on plans for Sunday School growth and new education. Bill's wife was just as involved. The whole family gained the love of the church. His children adapted to new friends and to the new town with ease.

Then one day Bill called me. "Ron, I need to see you," he said. We decided to meet at a restaurant for coffee. I agreed because I detected a note in his voice that was uncharacteristic. He said he did not want to go to his office.

"I'm in deep trouble," he began.

"How?" I asked.

"I have been caught owing money," he responded. The impact of his statement did not register. I thought maybe he had borrowed money from someone and had forgotten to pay it back and some church member was complaining. It was larger, much larger.

Bill had been involved for nearly two years in taking senior citizens and other interested persons on mission trips. Sometimes the trips lasted for a week or more and often were long distances away. Bill rented busses and secured hotel accommodations and arranged for meals. He worked months in advance and collected money for the trips from those who wanted to go. With the money, Bill was to prepay all expenses except meals.

But he didn't prepay the bills. He used the money himself. Bill spent the money a little at a time, thinking that before the bills came in he would pay it back out of the upcoming trip and so on. "Just how much do you owe?" I asked, still not wise to the problem.

"I owe about \$20,000. And one person in the community has filed a lawsuit against me. I also owe a lot of people in our church," he went to explain; most were senior citizens.

I nearly choked on my coffee and grew sick as emotionally I sank within. I simply could not believe what I was hearing. We talked for more than an hour. Never once in our conversation did Bill

acknowledge his actions as sinful, although he indicated concern for his family and for me. He felt he had "let down" so many people, as he described it.

Bill indicated that his wife did not know of the problem and that he feared for her. He also indicated that he believed word had gotten to the pastor and the deacon chair earlier that day. Bill realized it would mean his job. He was sure he would be sued and feared he could go to jail. I saw a terror in his face. He asked me to stand beside him, and I told him that I would. I realize now I didn't know what that meant.

I told Bill that I would pray for him and that I would do whatever I could as we all worked together through the situation. We parted and I went back home. I had grown to love Bill and his family; my wife and I both wept.

On the following Wednesday evening, the church called a business meeting. Bill had submitted his resignation to the personnel committee. I had worked behind the scenes with the power brokers of the church to try to cool the flames of anger toward Bill. Many wanted Bill to be prosecuted in the legal system. Most of the anger was directed at Bill because of the embarrassment the church would face. The pastor and I talked about his anger. He was angry because Bill had lied to him. Bill had denied the charges when the church began receiving phone calls from hotels and others wanting their money. He lied to the deacons who found out about the bills.

The personnel committee worked hard to make sure the business meeting would be characterized by peace and a rational response to the problem. We all saw this as a major test of our church's ability to handle a crisis that was spreading throughout the community. I was nervous because I knew several in the congregation wanted revenge. They were angry that our church would have to deal with such scandal. There was every kind of emotion present in the meeting. The question of liability came up over and over again. Many people were more concerned about the money than about Bill.

After everyone was assured that the church was not liable, the discussion turned to Bill and his family. Some tension had abated by now and the church voted to allow Bill to stay in the house for three months and to pay his salary for the rest of the month. Several loving people in the church sent money to Bill's family, and one businessman offered to help him find a job. Some seemed to know how to practice compassion.

On the other hand, there was still much anger in the church. Many who had lost money were bitter. They were not vocal within the church, but very vocal outside of it. We lost a couple families who felt we did not act appropriately toward Bill. They wanted justice, and they felt we did not provide for it.

I talked to Bill informally over the next few months as he worked out his financial problems. He told me he was in therapy and seemed optimistic. Several church members had sent him money to help pay his debts, but he owed so much it would take him years to pay it back. Bill seemed committed to paying off his debts. He had a new job as a salesman, his wife was working, and it seemed that time might be the answer.

But time was not on Bill's side. A few months passed and Bill's wife told him to leave; she was "fed up," as Bill described it. Bill said she told him she could never forgive him. A short time later Bill lost his job.

Through a friend, Bill was given housing in the city and went to work as a maintenance person. I called his employer who was a Christian and knew of Bill's problems. He assured me he would care for Bill and keep me informed. I received a phone call a few days later and was told that Bill's apartment had been entered and that Bill had been found in the corner of the room in a fetal position. His employer had grown anxious when Bill had not shown up for work.

I went to the hospital to be with Bill. The doctors would not say what was wrong with him. They had him in isolation and were running tests. I could see Bill through the window of his room; he looked

awful. I asked the nurse to give Bill a message that I was there and that I cared for him, and she said she would.

I telephoned the next afternoon and the nurse was vague about Bill's condition. When I asked her to explain, she simply said that he had deteriorated. I went to the hospital and was told Bill had died. Bill's wife told me that it appeared to her that he had lost the will to live. The doctors had indicated much the same.

This was the first time in my life I had seen someone die apparently of guilt and despair. Bill never seemed able to forgive himself for the pain he had caused others. He constantly told me he had let everyone down. As a result of Bill's inability to forgive himself, grief and despair took the energy of life from him. I am convinced that is what caused Bill's death. The loss of his ministry, friends, family and hope left Bill no tomorrows.

III. ANALYSIS OF THE CASE

Bill's case is obviously complex. I have noted some of the following dynamics operating in the case:

1. Bill's ability to continue stealing from those to whom he ministered
2. The apparent lack of conviction of sin in Bill's life
3. Betrayal of those who trusted Bill and who loved him
4. Bill's lack of ethics in handling money
5. Fear resulting from the consequences of Bill's sin
6. Bill's loss of vocation as a result of his actions
7. The loss of Bill's family through separation
8. The trauma of guilt in Bill's life
9. The task of peacemaking on the part of those who loved Bill
10. How Bill's sin affected the body of the church
11. The dynamic of forgiveness on the part of those who loved Bill
12. The apparent lack of forgiveness by many in the church
13. The lost opportunity of restoration as operative in a church willing to forgive
14. Bill's inability to forgive himself
15. The anger of the pastor as a response to Bill's sin
16. The absence of the pastor's role as a priest in facilitating Bill's need to confess his sins
17. The trauma of loneliness, despair and hopelessness in Bill's life
18. Bill's death as commentary on his life

19. My hurt, grief and need to forgive as operative in the case
20. Implications for ministry and restoration of the church and community

The factors listed above, when played out against the backdrop of a small town, a conservative church comprised mostly of older blue-collar workers which is historically slow to accept change, and a proud tradition in the church make it difficult for those who have been cheated of money to assimilate forgiveness as an ethical response. In addition, many lost a degree of confidence in "ministers."

IV. THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The following theological issues are pertinent to the case. The list is by no means exhaustive.

1. A theology of forgiveness
2. The nature of the church
3. Characteristics of an unforgiving church
4. Forgiveness as restoration; an alternative for the church
5. The message projected to the community when a church does not forgive and restore
6. A theology of loving and caring
7. The role of priest in forgiveness
8. Ministry to grief-stricken families
9. The role of scripture in crisis ministry
10. The pattern of Jesus' ministry to those needing forgiveness
11. A theology of judgment and the law
12. The perils of broken fellowship
13. Separation as an inappropriate response to ethical problems
14. Ethical standards imposed on ministers as contrasted to others
15. The doctrine of reconciliation
16. A theology of death and dying
17. Biblical models of forgiveness as standard for ethical responses to sin in the life of the minister
18. Implications for future ministry to church staff or professional ministers caught in wrongdoing

The above listed theological implications or issues are focused sharply around the central issues in this case: "What could have been done by the church to show forgiveness and to facilitate healing in Bill's life and ministry? What would have been the proper theological approach to forgiveness as operative in this case? Is there precedent in scripture for forgiveness as restoration?" This case is important because it focused sharply on a theological issue that could have resulted in the church moving

closer to the biblical norm of forgiveness. Instead, the church chose to ignore the pain of interaction with this case.

It is my belief that a significant theological lesson could have been learned had the church and its staff chosen to explore the concept of forgiveness instead of judgment. I also believe this case has volumes to say to the community at large about the nature of the church. If this case had been handled in a redemptive manner, I believe evangelistic growth could have occurred in the church as lost people who observed the dynamics of the case saw Christ embodied in the church's redemptive ministry to Bill. Instead, the opposite occurred, in at least one person's evaluation of our church's response. She said, "If that's the way your church handles people who make mistakes, then I do not want to be a part of it."

V. THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Forgiveness as defined in Webster's dictionary means "to cease to feel resentment against, on account of wrong committed; to give up claim to requital from or retribution upon (an offender); to remit the penalty of; to pardon." But this technical definition is far from complete. Forgiveness has to be examined from a theological point of view in order to be understood more clearly.

1. DEFINITIONS: WHAT FORGIVENESS IS AND WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT

"When you forgive a person who hurts you deeply and unfairly, you perform a miracle that has no equal."¹ So says Lewis B. Smedes. Forgiveness is an aggressive action on the part of the one offended. It is not easy; to forgive is to become vulnerable all over again. It is to open oneself up to the possibility of being hurt or wronged again. Smedes explains:

¹ Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 38.

No one really forgives unless he has been hurt. We turn the miracle into a cheap indulgence when we pretend to forgive people who have never hurt us . . . unless you are hurt, speak of something other than forgiving.²

Forgiveness is not merely forgetting.³ It is not ignoring the problem. Memory keeps pain alive; the hurt will not go away; it simply grows quietly like a cancer until some other action couples with it to explode in more violent anger.

We do not remember every hurt, of course. But we do remember those hurts that scar deeply our psyche. As Smedes says, "The pains we *dare* not remember are the most dangerous pains of all."⁴ Attempting to forget Bill's hurtful actions in the case above will not satisfy the need to forgive Bill.

Excusing is not forgiveness.⁵ It takes no special effort to excuse anyone. All kinds of excuses can be generated for an action of hurt against someone else.

2. FORGIVENESS AS A THEME IN SCRIPTURE

Learning to forgive one another and oneself is a central theme in the biblical message. From the earliest pages of scripture to Jesus' final utterances on the cross, forgiveness stands as the promise of new beginnings. But tragically, forgiveness has not always been the redemptive response it should be. Edna Hong remarks:

There are great acts of forgiveness recorded in the Old Testament just as there are great non-acts. An example of a tragic non-act of forgiveness was Sarah's refusal to forgive Hagar for bearing Abraham a son . . .⁶

² Lewis B. Smedes, "Forgiveness: The Power to Change the Past," *Christianity Today* 27/1 (1983): 23.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶ Edna Hong, *Forgiveness Is a Work as well as a Grace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 68-69.

These acts of non-forgiveness, however, should stand in sharp contrast to the biblical norm shown in other parts of scripture. For example, Sarah is contrasted with the ultimate forgiver in scripture, Jesus, as he shows time and time again that we have no reason to hold out on forgiving others. Jesus helped Peter expand his concept of forgiveness in Matthew's gospel:

Then came Peter to him, and said, LORD, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Til seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, until seven times: but, until seventy times seven. (Matt 18:21-22 KJV)

Without forgiveness, we are shackled forever to the mistakes and haunting memories of the past. Indeed, forgiveness frees the individual from the grip of mistakes that are irreversible. If miracles are important in the scriptures, surely we should note that one of the greatest miracles of all is the ability of a holy God to forgive. Forgiveness is not limited to the individual and his grateful understanding of the cleansing forgiveness can bring. Forgiveness extends to the larger community of faith. Inherent in that understanding is the role believers must play in helping other appropriate that forgiveness. Hong again reminds us:

When we speak of forgiveness of our sins in Christ Jesus, we often fail to include that he also calls us to forgive as we are forgiven and to form a redemptive community, a state of forgiveness here and now. We too are called to perform miracles of forgiveness--and not occasionally, not conditionally, not spasmodically, not capriciously. In the state of forgiveness one is predisposed and prepared at all times to perform the miracle of forgiveness.⁷

3. OLD TESTAMENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF FORGIVENESS

The earliest pages of the Old Testament tell the story of sin as it entered into the world. But it is not until later in Exodus that the concept of God's forgiveness of the people is reflected. As Swete says, "Adam dies on the day that he sins; . . . his life is henceforth a way to the grave."⁸ The Lord is represented as repenting that he had made humankind in the story of the Flood. God sweeps humankind

⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁸ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Forgiveness of Sins* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1916), 19.

away. Noah is spared not because he asked forgiveness of some sin but because he is depicted as a righteous man in contrast with the rest of humankind.

4. NEW TESTAMENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF FORGIVENESS

The New Testament is rich in its contribution to an understanding of forgiveness. Swete says:

The forgiveness of sins, already promised in the Old Testament, is connected by the New Testament with the person of Christ; it comes through, and only through, the Son of Man.⁹

Early in the New Testament, Jesus is shown as the one with authority to forgive sins. Not far into the gospels the record of objection is highlighted by the response of the scribes:

And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth. (Matt 9:2-3 KJV)

5. HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF FORGIVENESS

Christian writers of the generation that followed the New Testament writers were not silent on the subject of forgiveness. The Apostolic Fathers' writings are more pastoral than doctrinal but exhortations to repentance abound. Indeed, repentance seems to be the major factor in their understanding. Palmer cites several sources, beginning with St. Clement of Rome:

Schism divided the church at Corinth. Clement, the third successor of St. Peter, intervened to rebuke the rebellious faction and to restore unity. Even the sin of schism, which rends the seamless robe of Christ, can be forgiven after repentance.¹⁰

St. Ignatius of Antioch was sentenced by Trajan to be devoured by wild beasts. On the way to Rome he composed seven letters. Palmer quotes from one of his letters:

But where there is division and anger God does not abide. To all, however, who repent the Lord grants pardon, provided that through repentance they return to the unity of God and to the council of the bishop.¹¹

⁹ Ibid., 55.

¹⁰ Paul F. Palmer, *Sacraments and Forgiveness*(London: The Newman Press, 1959), 10.

In both letters above clearly the focus is on repentance as a part of their pastoral care of the churches. Restoration was not the main theme.

Historical investigation has demonstrated that forgiveness fell prey to a systematized function carefully guarded by the church. It was not at all reflective of the New Testament community, which emphasized repentance, confessions of sins and restoration to fellowship.

6. GUILT RELIEF AS A DYNAMIC IN THE NEED OF FORGIVENESS

Rupert Powell indicates that sin is an experience as well as a theological dogma.¹² One of the strongest emotions that results when a person is confronted with personal sinfulness is that of guilt.

Sherrill indicates:

The feeling of guilt, when that feeling issues out of the deeper strata of the personality, is one of the most painful of all human experiences. The suffering, being the result both of hurt and terror, is so intense that it cannot be borne for long periods of time without deterioration of some sort. The human organism seems capable of enduring anything in the universe except a clear, complete, fully conscious view of one's self as he actually is.¹³

7. THE EXPERIENCE OF FORGIVING ONESELF

A theology of forgiveness must shout God's readiness to forgive us. as Wallen puts it:

Christ's forgiveness is glorious. Dark, unhealthful conditions are either driven out or transformed into wholesome drives, attitudes, capabilities, and directions when Christ comes into the human heart . . .¹⁴

With the promise of forgiveness at hand, what are the steps to forgiveness? First is forgiving oneself.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Rupert Powell, "Some Psychological Aspects of Forgiveness" (Th.M. thesis, The Southern Baptist Seminary, 1955), 5.

¹³ Lewis Joseph Sherrill, *Guilt and Redemption* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1945), 100.

¹⁴ John H. Wallen, "Freedom from the Fear of Being Unforgiven," *Christianity Today*, 10 August, 1973, 10.

7. FORGIVENESS AS RESTORATION

Biblical models of forgiveness indicate that restoration or reconciliation is central to the concept of forgiveness. This was the good news of the gospel. Jesus' sacrifice was a way to restore humankind to God in the only way possible. The Old Testament is a study in God's seeking to restore a people unto God's self. Likewise, in human relationships the experience of forgiveness does not occur until the person who has been wronged can look with restorative eyes upon the one who wronged.

8. THE CHURCH AS A RESTORING COMMUNITY

Sebastian De Grazia rightly observes:

The one true religion in all the world and in all time teaches that we were born to be together. Community is the natural order of man. Excommunicate him, he lives a living death . . . Men are never beyond the pale of forgiveness, never beyond the pale of sin that needs forgiving. When priest and minister find the common sins of man too grievous to forgive, it is time for the church to think of internal medicine. A church that has not the gift of forgiveness has neither the gift of truth.¹⁵

VI. THEOLOGICAL AFFIRMATIONS

1. The Old Testament message communicates God's desire to forgive and restore his people to a right relationship with him.
2. The New Testament is the testimony of God's ultimate sacrifice given for forgiveness and restoration of humankind.
3. Christ's death on the cross is testimony of God's desire to pay whatever price necessary for humankind's restoration.
4. God limits God's self, however, by giving humankind freedom to choose whether to be restored to God or not. When humankind makes the choice to be restored to God, then forgiveness, release of guilt, freedom and reconciliation come.
5. God suffers the pain of remembering those who refuse his forgiveness and reconciliation. but God forgets the sins of those who choose God and restores them to the position of never having sinned. This is justification. And it is done through Christ's sacrifice for our sins.

¹⁵ Sebastian De Grazia, "Toleration and Forgiveness," *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 15 December, 1949, 151.

VII. PASTORAL RESPONSE

If I could bring Bill back from the grave, I would seek to restore him to the church that cast him aside. It possibly would mean a long and painful process of helping the church understand its mission as a church. But the church that quietly dismisses its sinners is not faithful to the New Testament. This is the only acceptable biblical model of forgiveness.

I was not aggressive enough in my forgiveness of Bill. I have learned through my study. Though I exhibited what I thought was Christ like concern for Bill, I felt fear and isolation from Bill because of his actions. Thus, in reality, I did not forgive him for hurting our church and for hurting me.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bangley, Bernard. *Forgiving Yourself*. Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.
- Begum, David. *Guilt: Where Religion and Psychology Meet*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963.
- Berggren, Erik. *The Psychology of Confession*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975.
- Boyle, Timothy. "Communicating the Gospel in Terms of Shame." *The Japan Christian Quarterly* XLX/1 (1984): 41-46.
- Brandsma, Jeffrey M. "Forgiveness: A Dynamic, Theological and Therapeutic Analysis." *Pastoral Psychology* 31 (Fall 1982) : 40-49.
- Carter, Karen S. "Forgiveness Revisited: God's and Ours." *Brethren Life and Thought* XXII (1977): 199-209.
- etc.