

# SAFE AS CHURCHES IV

## PlenaryAddress: Forgiving the Unforgivable?

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### 1. Scope of the Presentation

My presentation for the plenary is from the perspective of Psychology. I will begin by delineating forgiveness from a psychological perspective, as opposed to a theological perspective. I will then describe a popular psychological intervention to promote forgiveness, look at the support for its effectiveness, and describe some critiques of this approach.

Finally, as a way of approaching the question of forgiving the unforgivable, I will then look at the contribution of perpetrators to forgiveness and the question of earning forgiveness.

I will be taking an individual perspective on forgiveness in this plenary. Forgiveness by communities of those who are wronged and within communities are very important topics. However, I do not have the scope to address these issues in this plenary address.

### 2. What is Forgiveness? Is anything unforgivable?

Theologically, is anything unforgivable? I leave this question to my theological colleagues. However, I want to note the main points of a Christian view of forgiveness.

#### *Forgiveness in Christian Theology*

Theologically, in forgiveness God takes upon himself the weight of our sin, frees us from entrapment in it, and makes us right with himself by the life, death and resurrection of his Son. Those who are forgiven are justified before God the Father, who accepts them and approves of them. There is therefore now no condemnation for them before God.

Since they have been reconciled with God the Father, those whom he has forgiven are called to practice forgiveness and seek reconciliation with others. On the one hand, they are to seek reconciliation with those whom they have offended and do what is needed to restore their relationship with them, by apologising, asking for pardon, and offering restitution. On the other hand, they are to forego punitive payback and give up the right for revenge against those who have abused them. Those who have been reconciled with God through the gospel of forgiveness should also act as compassionate agents of God's merciful and restorative justice in their communities.

So, theologically, there is an imperative for Christians to seek reconciliation with others they have wronged by doing what is needed to restore damaged relationships. Secondly, if we are wronged by others, there is an imperative for us to forgive those who wronged us. Thirdly, we should promote justice and reconciliation in our communities.

### *Forgiveness in Psychology (and Moral Philosophy)*

Interpersonal forgiveness has become a topic of recent interest for psychologists. Although many of the major contributors have a Christian background and perspective, this is not necessarily the case. Forgiveness of our sins by God is not a subject to which Psychology can contribute; however, the experience of forgiveness and the processes by which people forgive others are topics that may be addressed by psychologists. For psychologists and moral philosophers, forgiveness is of course interpersonal, 'horizontal' between people rather than 'vertical' with God as well as horizontal.

Forgiveness for psychologists and moral philosophers has been defined:

1. by cognitive changes towards the wrongdoer, involving letting go of the sense of victimization
  2. emotionally, as the cessation of resentment toward someone who has harmed.
- Forgiveness is a "change of heart" which entails ceasing to resent someone who has harmed you.

Forgiveness may go beyond ceasing resentment to a change of heart such that you have the power to recall those who harmed you and wish them well.

Forgiveness is a gift from one harmed to her wrongdoer, not a right.

Scholars have also defined what forgiveness is not: forgetting (what happened); excusing ('It was wrong, but ...'); justifying or condoning ('It wasn't wrong because ...'); mercy, that is exempting a wrongdoer from punishment.

### *Reconciliation*

A debated question in the forgiveness literature is the relationship of forgiveness to reconciliation. For some scholars, the normal endpoint of forgiveness is reconciliation.

Reconciliation can be viewed as the restoration of an amicable relationship with the offender. Less stringently, reconciliation can be defined as at minimum the civil relationship prevailing between strangers in a community.

As we shall note shortly, other scholars separate forgiveness from reconciliation, so that forgiveness is a more *intrapersonal* process and reconciliation is an *interpersonal* process.

Psychologically, what is unforgivable?

I think this is an empirical question, which depends on a few factors.

1. How forgiveness is defined, with or without reconciliation. If reconciliation in the strict sense of having an amicable relationship is required, then perhaps some things are unforgivable.
2. How the wrongdoer behaves towards the one wronged. Can wrongdoers act in some ways to make forgiveness more likely?
3. The nature of the wrong. Some things, such as actions that involve loss of life, may be more difficult to forgive.

### **3. Psychological Interventions for Forgiveness**

In this section, I want to describe a dominant psychological approach to forgiveness, where forgiveness is a psychological intervention.

One of the major research groups concerned with forgiveness is led by Robert Enright. Enright and his colleagues understand *forgiveness as a process*, which often starts at the point where a person experiences intense anger at another person or people, based on real injustice or harm.

Forgiveness is advocated primarily as a helpful process for individuals for reducing anger and improving emotional health. The Enright group proposed a phase model of forgiveness, which provides a model or map of the psychological process of forgiveness that can be used by a counsellor who is working with someone who has been wronged.

The first phase of the Enright approach is concerned with *uncovering effects of the injustice* on a person's life. The second phase is concerned with *thinking about what forgiveness is and is not, and with making a decision to forgive*. For example, forgiveness is contrasted with pardoning, forgetting, cloaked revenge, and reconciliation.

The third phase is concerned with *helping the client to understand* that the person who committed the offence is more than the offence, which may result in experiencing some compassion toward the offender. In the fourth phase, the experience of being forgiven by others may be considered, and *new ways to interact with the offender and with others* are explored.

## **Phases of Forgiving in the Enright Model**

### *Uncovering Phase*

1. Looking at defences against anger
2. Releasing anger
3. Admitting shame if appropriate
4. Awareness of depleted energy
5. Awareness of ruminating about the unjust event
6. Awareness of comparing oneself with the injurer
7. Realizing that one may be adversely changed by the injury
8. Awareness of changed view about a 'just world'

### *Decision Phase*

9. Insight that old strategies are not working
10. Willingness to consider forgiveness
11. Commitment to forgive the offender

### *Work Phase*

12. Looking at the wrongdoer differently
13. Empathy and compassion for the wrongdoer
14. Bearing the pain
15. Giving a moral gift to the offender

### *Deepening Phase*

16. Finding meaning in suffering and forgiveness
17. Realisation of one's need for forgiveness in the past
18. Insight that one is not alone
19. Realisation of new purpose because of the injury
20. Awareness of decreased negative emotions, internal emotional release, perhaps positive feelings towards offender

*It is advocated that the Enright model should be used flexibly and adapted for every person.* The approach is not meant to be prescriptive, or followed through in a rigid manner. There may be wide differences in the amount of time that people spend in each of the phases of forgiveness. There is also no prediction about how long it will take a person to forgive.

The Enright approach or similar psychological approaches have been tried with a variety of different groups of people in some well-conducted empirical studies, some appearing in very prominent academic journals. Some groups who have participated in forgiveness interventions include: adolescents; men following abortion; survivors of incest.

There is evidence across a number of studies that process-based interventions for forgiveness of others do result in: substantial increases in forgiveness; improvements in emotional health, such as lower anxiety and depression.

It is important to be clear about the nature of the Enright approach to forgiveness. The starting point is a person's experience of continuing anger, which is based on real injustice. The path to forgiveness is undertaken for individual reasons, to heal such emotional problems as consuming anger, anxiety, and depression. It may take a considerable amount of time to complete the process of forgiveness, and the time taken depends on the person who is going through the process of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is undertaken *unilaterally*, without necessarily involving the person responsible for the harm and injustice. It does not require repentance from the offender in order to forgive. Forgiveness is viewed as separate from reconciliation. Reconciliation may occur with the offender at some point, but is not the aim of this type of 'forgiveness therapy.'

### *Reconciliation*

According to Enright and colleagues, forgiveness can be a free choice on the part of the wronged person, which *can be unconditional regardless of what the offender does*. However, reconciliation always involves at least two people entering into a relationship.

Reconciliation depends upon the offender's willingness and ability to change his or her ways. Importantly, forgiveness is often necessary for genuine reconciliation to occur. Also, people may continue to have personal interactions with people who have wronged them without forgiving. This sort of relationship may be described as cordial, but it is unlikely to be a trusting or a reconciled relationship, according to this view.

For reconciliation to occur, two things are required: forgiveness by the injured person; and signs of change by the offender. Reparation to the injured person could be in the form of goods or services. However, an apology is a common and important form of reparation. Forgiveness can occur without apology, but an expressed apology may often help a person to move along the path of forgiveness. Although a person may forgive another without an apology being offered, it may be *necessary* for reconciliation that the offender makes an apology.

#### **4. Criticisms of Psychological Interventions for Forgiveness**

Psychological approaches to forgiveness, and specifically the Enright model, have been questioned for a few reasons.

1. First, it may not be clear that forgiveness is the most appropriate approach at a particular time. For example, a woman who was physically assaulted by a stranger may be troubled by recurring images of the assault, may feel frequently anxious and may avoid the place where she was assaulted. In this type of situation, psychological approaches for managing intense fear are likely to be most appropriate at this time. The person who was assaulted may wish to look at forgiveness in the future. Anger, rather than fear, is an indication for the intervention of forgiveness.
2. The forgiveness model distinguishes between understanding an offender's behaviour and excusing it. However, some critics say that it is difficult to make this sort of distinction. Therefore, people who have been victims of injustice may feel pressured to excuse the harm inflicted on them. This point alerts us to the need to be clear with people who suffer injustice that understanding why somebody hurt them does not exonerate the offender from responsibility for what he or she did.
3. It is possible that a person who forgives may accept an unjust situation which will continue to harm them. This point raises the difficult issue of advocacy. Who should decide that a person should not continue to stay in an unjust situation? When should a person be advised to leave a relationship or other setting?
4. The Enright approach to forgiveness has been described as implicitly Christian. Critics of the Enright model suggest that the Christian view of forgiveness that underpins the approach should be made explicit. Furthermore, they ask whether this approach is appropriate for people without a Christian faith or background. For example, the Jewish view of forgiveness requires that a person must repent before forgiveness may be offered.
5. A person who has suffered injustice may feel pressured to forgive someone who harmed them and resume their previous relationship, even when the offender denies the injustice or has not offered an apology or other signs of repentance. This situation may lead to further experience of victimization. This particular objection to forgiveness may be addressed to a degree by distinguishing between forgiveness and reconciliation.

#### **5. Earning Forgiveness**

In this part, I want to consider the behaviour of wrongdoers. Can forgiveness be earned? This question has been asked in the literature.

If forgiveness is a gift, then of course it cannot be earned. However, another way to ask the question is: how might a wrongdoer behave, so that the person he or she wronged would be more inclined to forgive?

It is illustrative to tell the famous story of Katherine Ann Power.

Katherine Power was a member of a radical group protesting US involvement in the Vietnam War. In 1970, she was one of five people involved in robbing a bank for their cause, as the driver of a getaway car. During the robbery, one of the group shot and killed a police officer.

After the robbery, Power went underground. She travelled from state to state, evading the FBI. She eventually obtained a false birth certificate, changed her name, married, has children, and became an exemplary member of her community, trying to live her life as an act of contrition for the death of the police officer, Walter Schroeder. However, she suffered from depression over a considerable time. Finally, after confiding her secret to a therapist, she surrendered to authorities in 1993, and pleaded guilty to manslaughter. She was sentenced to imprisonment and was released in 1999.

Power did a great deal of reflection on her own and with a therapist while in prison, as she moved through a process of remorse and repentance. Power apologized to the Schroeder family and sought the opportunity to meet with them to work toward reconciliation. She would have liked to be offered forgiveness, but stated she had no right to ask anything of them. The family rejected her requests.

Power was present with the family at her parole hearing in 1998. She offered an apology with her request to be released on parole. When she became aware that family members did not believe in her sincerity because her statement was coupled with a request for parole, she withdrew her request for parole, so that she spent another year in prison.

This had the effect of convincing the Schroeder family that Power was sincere. The family felt good about the parole hearing. According to the scholar who recorded the story (Landman, 2002), the family's statement was not forgiveness, but was something close to it.

This story describes a wrongdoer who has done as much as possible to make restitution and to reconcile with people wronged by her actions, being sensitive to their feelings and wishes. The story suggests that, in some cases, even with tremendous efforts to 'earn' forgiveness, forgiveness may not be forthcoming.

## **6. Conclusions and Issues**

In considering forgiveness interventions, I want to make the following points.

1. I am slightly uneasy about whether the Enright approach, as an individual intervention only, is actually forgiveness. Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that such approaches are of real psychological benefit to people who have suffered serious wrongs, making an impact on mental health. If the person wishes to follow the process of forgiveness, the Enright approach may offer a useful 'map' for the journey, as it is based on common experiences of people who have forgiven others. The model can show that other people have had similar experiences and have

moved onwards in the process of forgiveness. For example, the model may offer hope that they will not always feel as angry as they do at this particular time.

2. It is important to show sensitivity when considering the present needs and situation of a person who has been wronged. Addressing forgiveness may not be the appropriate thing to do at a particular time.

3. The objections to unilateral forgiveness are important to listen to.  
Does encouraging unilateral forgiveness allow injustice to continue?  
Do people who have been wronged give up their self-respect if they forgive unilaterally?  
Can further victimization occur?

For me, the answer to all these questions is potentially yes. On the other hand, I have some objections to these objections.

First, forgiveness may be very empowering for people who have been wronged. It may lead to increased self-respect rather than surrendering of self-respect. Second, for Christians who have been wronged, to suggest that they should withhold forgiveness because the wrongdoer has not apologized or sought forgiveness may be dissonant with their religious convictions. It is important to note that, while forgiveness of others is a Christian imperative, there is no time schedule for forgiveness. Pressure from other people to offer forgiveness quickly is not helpful and may be harmful.

*I also want to consider the perspective of wrongdoers.*

4. From the perspective of wrongdoers, there is an imperative to seek reconciliation: by facing the strong emotions of shame, guilt, and remorse, and undergoing the process of repentance.

5. It is important to facilitate deep repentance and to encourage sincere efforts at restitution and apology. These efforts should be made not to 'earn' forgiveness but because reconciliation is a good thing for those who have been wronged, for the community, and also for wrongdoers, who might, in the end receive:

'the gift of forgiveness.'



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