

12.1 Research the topic of biblical forgiveness and write a scholarly paper entitled, "The Basis and Role of Forgiveness in Conflict Management."

"THE BASIS AND ROLE OF FORGIVENESS IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT."

We are living in a day when the subject of forgiveness is much discussed. The president of the United States has been impeached by the House of Representatives and faces a trial in the Senate. Iraq has consistently disregarded United Nations sanctions and has been chastened by the United States and Britain through the use of missiles and bombs. Israel and the Palestinians express a semblance of outward conciliation while marshalling for conflict against each other. The Balkan countries propagate ethnic cleansing as a throwback from centuries of ethnic hatred. England and Ireland hold their breath to see if the latest attempt to foster reconciliation between the factions in the religious war between Protestants and Catholics has been successful. In each of these situations, some would suggest that forgiveness is the single overarching need and, if implemented, all such conflicts would disappear.

The fact is that forgiveness, or rather, the misunderstanding of and/or incorrect application of forgiveness, may be a major reason many of these and other intractable conflicts are not and cannot be resolved. The objective of this paper is not to equip the conciliator with a sure-fire method for solving every dispute known to man but to equip him or her to better understand the pitfalls caused by a misunderstanding of forgiveness and to avoid falling into them themselves. The first step is to understand some of the prevailing ideas as to what forgiveness is.

There is no way that this single paper can address all of the issues that could be raised regarding forgiveness both in its definition and application. Nor is this meant to be the final word on this subject. Instead it is hoped that this discussion will open the door for further reflection and discussion from others who seek a thoughtful and balanced approach to conflict management. The desired outcome of this paper is that, as a better understanding of biblical forgiveness is achieved, we will all become more effective as conflict managers and thereby will bring greater glory to our Lord Jesus Christ.

PREVAILING VIEWS REGARDING FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is defined and applied in a myriad of ways today. Because of this, one's attitude toward forgiveness often becomes a part of the problem rather than a part of the solution to conflicts. One party comes to the conflict with one view of forgiveness and the other party comes with another. The situation is further complicated when a third party mediator comes with yet another view. With regard to forgiveness, the first step in any conflict management situation is for all parties to at least attempt to understand each other's point of view if not to agree on the meaning of forgiveness. The following definitions are meant to assist in identifying certain presuppositions and are not to be used as straw men to be knock down. The titles are derived from the process by which forgiveness is achieved and are not meant to be pejorative.

We will examine four types of forgiveness popular today: *Sociological Forgiveness*, *Psychological Forgiveness*, *Existential Forgiveness*, and *Indulgence Forgiveness*. We will then seek to distinguish these four types from *Biblical Forgiveness*. Often these concepts are interchangeable as the following article reprinted from the Internet demonstrates:

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

VATICAN CITY

Calling Christianity's 2,000th anniversary a year of mercy, new decrees from Pope John Paul offer the faithful a chance for forgiveness—and say the church will seek forgiveness as well.

John Paul's papal bull, being issued today, upholds a 700-year-old tradition of celebrating Church anniversary years, or jubilees, by offering indulgences—acts of penance that allow followers to be forgiven for their sins.

For individuals, John Paul says, the penance can be as simple as giving up smoking for a day.

Expanding the tradition, the Pope also is inviting such acts of atonement by the Church and its clerics—and by nations, in the form of forgiving Third World debt.

"As a successor of Peter, I ask that in this year of mercy the Church, strong in the holiness that she receives from her Lord, should kneel before God and implore forgiveness for the past and present sins of her sons and daughters," John Paul writes.

Papal bulls are solemn edicts, emphasized by the use of fine paper and lead seals. The Vatican released copies of the edict Friday.

John Paul wants the Church to enter the third millennium with a clear conscience. He has expressed regret for some past actions of Catholics, including the Church's overall failure to do more to help Jews against the Nazis.

Jewish groups and others have urged a specific recounting of Church wrongs.

After calling for Catholics' "humble recognition of our faults," John Paul's edict pointedly adds: "At the same time, there will be no lack of fair-minded people able to recognize that past and present history also records incidents of exclusion, injustice and persecution directed against the sons and daughters of the Church."

The papal bull also addresses Israel's claim to the entire city of Jerusalem, which the Vatican does not recognize. Church leaders want the city's holy sites of all faiths protected by international statute.

"May the jubilee serve to advance mutual dialogue until the day when all of us together—Jews, Christians and Muslims—will exchange the greeting of peace in Jerusalem," it says.

For individuals, the papal bull outlines acts of penance as simple as volunteer work for charities or giving up "superfluous consumption," such as smoking or drinking.

Jubilee indulgences are a tradition dating to Pope Boniface VIII, who marked 1300 by offering "abundant remission and pardon of sins" to those who made pilgrimages to St. Peter's Basilica that year.¹

The expansive goals set by the Church and reported in this news article leave the reader wondering exactly what forgiveness is and how it is received or given. An examination of this and other writings suggest the following definitions.

Sociological Forgiveness

This is given as the first in this series of definitions because it is probably the most prevalent today and often the first form to be sought in any conflict management situation. In *Sociological Forgiveness*, forgiveness is sought for the good of society on behalf of one society for offenses committed against another. It is seen as an indispensable act necessary to bring peace often irrespective of any question of justice because usually there is no way to go back and make right the injustice. It is often sought without due concern for sound doctrine. In the rush to forgiveness, some who are not consciously aware that they have been party to any offense, are pressured to confess social wrongs for the appearance of unity.

A positive aspect of this view is that it appreciates the damage to society caused by conflicts between opposing parties. Still, there are times when we cannot expect to receive full satisfaction from a loss incurred at the hands of others. No amount of restitution will undo completely damage cause by the conflict. In such cases the only way to resolve the issue is for the offended to forgive the offender. There is benefit to society from such acts of contrition. Yet, because the offended and offending parties are

¹ "2000 a Year for Forgiveness, Pope Decrees" New York Daily News Online, November 29,

usually not present, such an approach to forgiveness in a long run is not helpful and may even confuse the issue when seeking a definition of biblical forgiveness.

The negative result of this view is that it places the good of society above the rights of the individual with little regard for justice and ignores the damage continued injustice causes to society as a whole. Simply waving the magic wand of forgiveness over a situation does not lessen the damage that is caused by the injustice. A healthy society will not seek peace at any cost and will seek both individual and corporate equity to the fullest extent possible. *Sociological Forgiveness* fails to answer two important questions. First, how do these acts of contrition now right the injustices of the past? Second, what happens when the offenses committed and wounds inflicted are so deep that such papering over only breeds further resentment?

To some extent, this is the issue Simon Wiesenthal raised in his book, "The Sunflower." In this book *Sociological Forgiveness* takes on the form of seeking forgiveness from a representative of society for sins committed by the individual seeking forgiveness. The issues raised by Wiesenthal have been discussed by many with regard to the matter of forgiveness:

(The book) begins with a haunting story, a remembrance of a true event that occurred during his imprisonment.

By chance, Wiesenthal was yanked out of a work detail and taken up a back stairway to a darkened hospital room. A nurse led him into the room, then left him alone with a figure wrapped in white, lying on a bed. The figure was a German soldier, badly wounded, swathed in yellow-stained bandages. Gauze covered his entire face.

In a weakened, trembling voice, the German made a kind of sacramental confession to Wiesenthal. He recounted his boyhood and early days in the Hitler Youth Movement. He told of actions along the

Russian front, and the increasingly harsh measures his SS unit had taken against the Jewish populace.

And then he told of a terrible atrocity, when all the Jews in one town were herded into a wooden frame building that was then set on fire. Burning bodies fell from the second floor, and the SS soldiers—he among them—shot them as they fell. He started to tell of one child in particular, a young boy with black hair and dark eyes, but his voice gave way.

Several times Wiesenthal tried to leave the room, but each time the ghost-like figure would reach out with a cold, bloodless hand and beg him to stay. Finally, after maybe two hours, the soldier explained why Wiesenthal had been summoned. He had asked a nurse if any Jews still existed; if so, he wanted one brought to his room for a last rite before death.

"I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you," he said to Wiesenthal, "But without your answer I cannot die in peace." And then he asked for forgiveness for all his crimes against the Jews—from a man who perhaps the next day might die at the hands of the soldier's SS comrades. Wiesenthal stood in silence for some time, staring at the man's bandaged face. At last he made up his mind and left the room, without saying a word. He left the soldier in torment, unforgiven.²

This is a good example of *Sociological Forgiveness*. It is seeking or granting forgiveness on the part of one individual or group of individuals on behalf of another individual or group of individuals. While it may provide momentary solace for the individuals immediately involved, it lacks any power to correct the injustice and may lead to further injustice by requiring acts of contrition from those who are not guilty of any offense.

It is a short step from the concept of *Sociological Forgiveness* to the inflicting of exorbitant penalties upon one or both parties in a conflict because of perceived damages to society either from past history or present circumstances. In such cases, the aggrieved parties may no longer be present but merely represented and the accused may have

² Philip Yancey, "Are We Asking Too Much?" Christianity Today, November 22, 1985, 30-31.

played no personal part in causing the loss. What is important from this point of view is that society has been harmed and someone must pay the price. Someone must ask for and/or grant forgiveness for the good of society. By this act of forgiveness, it is believed, justice is somehow achieved.

Another example of how *Sociological Forgiveness* is applied is in the attempt by some religious groups to atone for past mistakes by seeking and giving blanket forgiveness. Pope John has declared the year 2000 to be a year of forgiveness. This current year, 1999, will be used to promote this attitude of forgiveness among many groups so that it can be implemented next year. This will be discussed more at length later on in this paper.

Already this movement is sweeping through many Protestant denominations through the ministry of "Promise Keepers." In this movement, pastors are called upon to confess the errors of their denomination and/or association of churches and seek the forgiveness of the denomination and/or association of churches which has somehow been injured. One denominational leader, Joseph Tkach, President of the Worldwide Church of God, has done this through an article in his denomination's publication, The Plain Truth, entitled, "Forgive Us Our Trespasses." In his article he writes:

As regular readers of this magazine know, the Worldwide Church of God, sponsor of *The Plain Truth*, has changed its position on numerous long-held beliefs and practices during the past few years. . .

. . . In his mercy, God has shown us that old covenant obligations do not apply to Christians who are under the new covenant. He has led us into the riches of his grace and a renewed relationship with Jesus Christ. He has opened our hearts and minds to the joy of his salvation. The Scriptures speak to us with fresh meaning, and we rejoice daily in the personal relationship we have with our Lord and Savior.

At the same time, we are acutely aware of the heavy legacy of our past.

The article "Healing the Wounds," beginning on page 4, explains how the Holy Spirit is working today in the body of Christ to heal historic wounds and restore good relations between offenders and offended. It is my painful responsibility to acknowledge that the Worldwide Church of God has been among the offenders.

Our flawed doctrinal understanding clouded the plain gospel of Jesus Christ and led to a variety of wrong conclusions and unscriptural practices. We have much to repent of and apologize for.³

After listing a number of doctrinal errors previously taught by his denomination, Tkach writes:

We make no attempt to cover up the doctrinal and scriptural errors of our past, it is not our intention to merely paper over the cracks. We are looking our history squarely in the face and confronting the faults and sins we find. They will always remain a part of our history, serving as a perpetual reminder of the dangers of legalism.

But we cannot live in the past. We must rise above our past. We must move on."⁴

In the companion article in the same issue, John Dawson explains the motivation for the actions by Joseph Tkach taken on behalf of the denomination he represents:

As Christianity prepares to enter its third millennium, an important phenomenon is sweeping the Christian world. It is a wave of confession and repentance for past sins and offenses against others.

Many Christian groups have recognized a need to repent for those times in history when they or their forebears deviated from the spirit of the gospel, injured others and brought shame upon the name of Jesus Christ.

This mass expression of regret and contrition is unprecedented. Many Christians attribute this wave of repentance to a powerful working of the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ worldwide.

They characterize it as a surging tide of God's grace, intended to wash Christianity clean of its historic sins and achieve long-overdue

³ Joseph Tkach, "Forgive Us Our Trespasses," The Plain Truth, March/April 1996, 1.

⁴ Ibid.

reconciliation—the restoration of harmony and good relations which injured individuals and groups.⁵

Dawson, who is author and founder of the International Reconciliation Coalition, goes on to report various examples of public contrition on the part of denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention's resolution against racism, German Christians who apologized for Nazi atrocities against the Dutch during World War II, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for the anti-Semitism of its founder, Martin Luther, the Dutch Reformed Church to black South Africans and others.

Concerning the Roman Catholic Church he writes:

Pope John Paul II has declared that the Roman Catholic Church cannot enter the third Christian millennium without purifying itself through repentance of its historical transgressions. In 1992, he apologized in Africa for his church's complicity in the African slave trade, and in Latin America for Catholic exploitation of Native Americans. In 1995, in the Czech Republic, he asked forgiveness for Catholic-Protestant wars in Europe during the Counter-Reformation.⁶

In *Sociological Forgiveness*, because the interests of specific parties must give way to the interests of society at large, the validity of personal claims to justice or injustice are easily ignored and the penalty for violating society's interests are more readily charged to bystanders who may in fact be personally innocent in the matter. More to the immediate issue, *Sociological Forgiveness* will do very little to resolve specific conflicts in specific circumstances and so will have little benefit if used as a tool in conflict management. It may in fact be little more than a thinly veiled form of avoidance as a style of conflict management.

⁵ Ibid, 4.

⁶ Ibid.

Psychological Forgiveness

This second definition is commonly found in counseling situations where an individual is encouraged to grant forgiveness for the benefit of his or her own psychological well-being. As with *Sociological Forgiveness*, the emphasis is not upon the injustice of the situation but upon the affect of one's own attitude toward the injustice. The goal is to change the person's attitude and, in so doing, resolve any conflicts that may exist.

In the application of this form of forgiveness, the counselor may or may not seek to understand the actual form or extent of the injustice. The important thing is not the correcting of the injustice but the changing of the attitude of the aggrieved party toward the injustice. In so doing, it is supposed that the one who grants the forgiveness will become healthier psychologically by doing so.

The actual result of such a view of forgiveness may be the exact opposite of what is intended. Instead of bringing the individual to a place of greater psychological health, the counselor may witness greater instability and even a separation from reality on the part of the one being counseled as he or she seeks to ignore true justice and live with the injustice.

Existential Forgiveness

A third type of forgiveness is *Existential Forgiveness*. In order to provide a clear understanding of what I mean by *Existential Forgiveness*, the reader must have some understanding of existentialism as a philosophy. The man considered to be the father of modern existential thought was Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher, who wrote

during the mid-1800's. Existentialism has taken on many forms since its beginning and some, who are considered to be existentialists, refused to be associated with this philosophy. However, it is generally accepted that the basic tenants of this philosophy are the absurdity of the human condition and that this absurdity produces alienation among members of society.

One definition of existentialism given is:

. . . a philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts.⁷

Kierkegaard stressed:

. . . the ambiguity and absurdity of the human situation. The individual's response to this situation must be to live a totally committed life, and this commitment can only be understood by the individual who has made it. The individual therefore must always be prepared to defy the norms of society for the sake of the higher authority of a personally valid way of life. Kierkegaard ultimately advocated a "leap of faith" into a Christian way of life, which, although incomprehensible and full of risk, was the only commitment he believed could save the individual from despair.⁸

Because of the profound affect Kierkegaard's philosophy has had upon current religious thought and particularly upon the topic of forgiveness, another view of this philosophy is in order"

EXISTENTIALISM (exerts) a major influence on modern Protestant theology. Kierkegaard described the various stages of existence as the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious; advancing through this "existential dialectic," the individual becomes increasingly aware of his relationship to God. This awareness leads to despair as he realizes the

⁷ The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition is licensed from Houghton Mifflin Company. Copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.

⁸ "Existentialism," *Microsoft® Encarta® 97 Encyclopedia*. © 1993-1996 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

antithesis between temporal existence and eternal truth. Reason is no help in achieving the final religious stage; a "leap of faith" is required.⁹

Another individual who influenced existential thought was Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher who wrote during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Concerning him we read:

Nietzsche, who was not acquainted with the work of Kierkegaard, influenced subsequent existentialist thought through his criticism of traditional metaphysical and moral assumptions and through his espousal of tragic pessimism and the life-affirming individual will that opposes itself to the moral conformity of the majority.¹⁰

Martin Heidegger, another German philosopher who lived from 1889 to 1976, took existentialism a step further.

Heidegger argued that humanity finds itself in an incomprehensible, indifferent world. Human beings can never hope to understand why they are here; instead, each individual must choose a goal and follow it with passionate conviction, aware of the certainty of death and the ultimate meaninglessness of one's life.¹¹

Some have interpreted Heidegger's "passionate conviction" to be a form of personal suicide. This is not physical suicide that culminates in physical death but a psychological suicide that is expressed in one's dedication to a cause no matter how narrow or extreme. We see this in modern day social activism in the church as many engage in marching and picketing and other forms of nonviolent and violent protests for or against various social causes. Through a process of cognitive deception, these

⁹ The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia is licensed from Columbia University Press. Copyright © 1991 by Columbia University Press. All rights reserved.

¹⁰ "Existentialism," *Microsoft® Encarta® 97 Encyclopedia*. © 1993-1996 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

¹¹ Ibid.

individuals minimize all other points of view and maximizes their own views in order to achieve what to them is a just balance in the world.

One writer points to "the prominence in it (Existentialism) of such themes as the apparent absurdity and futility of life, the indifference of the universe, and the necessity of engagement in a just cause"¹² (parenthesis mine). This worldview is inconsistent with God's view of the world revealed in the Bible. Because of the prevalence of this view among Christians today, many are defining forgiveness in existential terms without even knowing it. To them, forgiveness is a "leap of faith" or "passionate conviction" often for the good of society or to achieve personal psychological comfort in the face of a sea of absurdity.

Another writer expresses *Existential Forgiveness* this way:

Two anxieties dominate most of our lives. We are anxious in the face of our unchangeable past; we long to recreate segments of our private histories, but we are stuck with them. . .

. . . Toward the end of her almost epochal book, *The Human Condition* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958), the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt turns finally to these two neglected powers of the human spirit, concluding that only when we act after the fashion of the biblical Lord can we overcome our darkest forebodings...

. . . The only remedy for the inevitability of history, says Arendt, is forgiveness. She means that in the natural course of things we are stuck with our past and its effects on us. We may learn from our history, but we cannot escape it. We may forget our history, but we cannot undo it. We may be doomed to repeat our history, but we cannot change it. Our history is an inevitable component of our being. One thing only can release us from the grip of our history. That one thing is forgiveness.¹³

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Lewis B. Smedes, "Forgiveness: The Power to Change the Past," Christianity Today (January 7, 1983): 22-26.

From this we see that *Existential Forgiveness* is an attempt to redefine one's own existence through the act of forgiveness, which amounts to little more than psychological suicide. While it is difficult to find fault with the worldview of the existentialist or his personal attempt to redefine himself in terms of forgiveness, in the long run this approach to forgiveness fails to achieve its goals and is a very poor reflector of biblical forgiveness.

In many respects, *Existential Forgiveness* is a combination of all of the above because it is an attempt by the person granting forgiveness to define his own existence in an unjust world. The existential forgiver desires to see himself as a forgiver and in so doing sees himself as overcoming all of the injustices in this absurd world. Through forgiveness he accomplishes his own redemption from the absurdity of the world and, at the same time, produces a positive affect upon his own psychological frame of mind and upon society in general.

On the surface this type of forgiveness appears to provide all that is necessary for resolving conflicts among men on earth. Yet by definition it sidesteps the important issue of justice by first assuming that there can never be any justice based upon an absolute objective standard and therefore there is no need to work toward overall justice. If there is justice, it is justice as defined by the existentialist in his own existence and often at the expense of justice elsewhere in society.

Indulgence Forgiveness

This type of forgiveness is listed with the previous three in order to provide a complete continuum; *Sociological*, *Psychological*, and *Existential Forgiveness* at one end of the continuum and *Indulgence Forgiveness* at the other with others that might come to mind in between. This is the historical approach to forgiveness of the Catholic Church

that was reemphasized in a papal bull pronounced by Pope Paul VI. An article recently appearing on the Internet best defines it. Indulgence forgiveness is essentially the act of purchasing one's forgiveness or purchasing forgiveness of another person usually deceased. The forgiveness is granted by a representative of Christ and His church here on earth. The human representative determines the amount of the purchase price. Repentance and restitution are not prerequisites to the granting of the indulgence although strongly recommended. In order to honestly present what the Catholic Church teaches and to provide a basis for drawing some distinctions when comparing this to other views of forgiveness, portions of this papal bull are quoted extensively here.

Solemnly Promulgated By His Holiness, Pope Paul VI on January 1, 1967:

Chapter I

2. It is a divinely revealed truth that sins bring punishments inflicted by God's sanctity and justice. These must be expiated either on this earth through the sorrows, miseries and calamities of this life and above all through death, or else in the life beyond through fire and torments of "purifying" punishments. Therefore it has always been the conviction of the faithful that the paths of evil are fraught with many stumbling blocks and bring adversities, bitterness and harm to those who follow them.

These punishments are imposed by the just and merciful judgment of God for the purification of souls, the defense of the sanctity of the moral order and the restoration of the glory of God to its full majesty. Every sin in fact causes a perturbation in the universal order established by God in His ineffable wisdom and infinite charity, and the destruction of immense values with respect to the sinner himself and to the human community. Christians throughout history have always regarded sin not only as a transgression of divine law but also--though not always in a direct and evident way--as contempt for or disregard of the friendship between God and man, just as they have regarded it as a real and unfathomable offense against God and indeed an ungrateful rejection of the love of God shown us through Jesus Christ, who called His disciples friends and not servants.

3. It is therefore necessary for the full remission and--as it is called--reparation of sins not only that friendship with God be

reestablished by a sincere conversion of the mind and amends made for the offense against His wisdom and goodness, but also that all the personal as well as social values and those of the universal order itself, which have been diminished or destroyed by sin, be fully reintegrated whether through voluntary reparation which will involve punishment or through acceptance of the punishments established by the just and most holy wisdom of God, from which there will shine forth throughout the world the sanctity and the splendor of His glory. The very existence and the gravity of the punishment enable us to understand the foolishness and malice of sin and its harmful consequences.

The punishment or the vestiges of sin may remain to be expiated or cleansed and that they in fact frequently do even after the remission of guilt is clearly demonstrated by the doctrine on purgatory. In purgatory, in fact, the souls of those "who died in the charity of God and truly repentant, but before satisfying with worthy fruits of penance for sins committed and for omissions" are cleansed after death with purgatorial punishments. This is also clearly evidenced in the liturgically prayers with which the Christian community admitted to Holy Communion has addressed God since most ancient times: "that we, who are justly subjected to afflictions because of our sins, may be mercifully set free from them for the glory of thy name."

For all men who walk this earth daily commit at least venial sins; thus all need the mercy of God to be set free from the penal consequences of sin.

Chapter III, 6

. . . It was not believed, however, that the individual faithful by their own merits alone worked for the remission of sins of their brothers, but that the entire Church as a single body united to Christ its Head was bringing about satisfaction.

The Church of the Fathers was fully convinced that it was pursuing the work of salvation in community, and under the authority of the pastors established by the Holy Spirit as bishops to govern the Church of God. The bishops, therefore, prudently assessing these matters, established the manner and the measure of the satisfaction to be made and indeed permitted canonical penances to be replaced by other possibly easier works, which would be useful to the common good and suitable for fostering piety, to be performed by the penitents themselves and sometimes by others among the faithful.

Chapter IV

7. The conviction existing in the Church that the pastors of the flock of the Lord could set the individual free from the vestiges of sins by applying the merits of Christ and of the saints led gradually, in the course of the centuries and under the influence of the Holy Spirit's continuous

inspiration of the people of God, to the usage of indulgences which represented a progression in the doctrine and discipline of the Church rather than a change. From the roots of revelation a new advantage grew in benefit to the faithful and the entire Church.

The use of indulgences, which spread gradually, became a very evident fact in the history of the Church when the Roman Pontiffs decreed that certain works useful to the common good of the Church "could replace all penitential practices" and such works were granted "by the mercy of Almighty God and. . .trusting in the merits and the authority of His Apostles" and "by virtue of the fullness of the apostolic power", not only full and abundant forgiveness, but the most complete forgiveness for their sins possible."¹⁴

Before finding fault with this point of view or dismissing it outright because it is "Catholic," we need to look at some of the positive aspects of the *Indulgence Forgiveness* point of view. First and foremost is that it assumes that every action of man has moral implications and is either good or bad, is either an act of sin or an act of righteousness before God. This is consistent with Scripture. Three passages taken together demonstrate this truth: "Whatever is not from faith is sin."¹⁵ "Therefore, to one who knows {the} right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin."¹⁶ "Sin is lawlessness."¹⁷ Therefore forgiveness has more to do with satisfying God than satisfying men.

Many Protestant attempts to establish a working definition of forgiveness fail to incorporate this moral connection with God into their definition. As we will see when we compare the Old Testament and New Testament teachings regarding forgiveness, the very meaning of the Greek and Hebrew terms translated into English as "forgiveness"

¹⁴ APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTION ON INDULGENCES *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* taken from the Internet 12/29/98 and made available by Paul Halsall <Halsall@murray.fordham.edu.>

¹⁵ Romans 14:23.

¹⁶ James 4:17.

demand that this moral connection with God be considered and without it there can be no biblical forgiveness.

A second positive aspect of the *Indulgence Forgiveness* definition is that it assumes a connection between the role God plays and the role men play in forgiveness. While we may not agree with the theological conclusions drawn by the Catholic Church from this connection, understanding their view will go a long way to helping us understand forgiveness as it is revealed in the Bible.

A third positive aspect of the *Indulgence Forgiveness* point of view is that it at least raises the issue of the need for repentance and restitution in this life and the need for church leaders and, in our case, conflict managers to judiciously determine when true repentance and proper restitution has taken place. More will be said about this later on.

The most important negative aspect of the *Indulgence Forgiveness* point of view is that it is based upon doctrine derived from the teachings of the Fathers and thus goes beyond what Protestants agree is the teachings of the canon of Scripture. By placing bishops in the position of human judges who have the authority to establish the measure of the indulgence and to grant forgiveness accordingly, the system of indulgences as applied by unscrupulous church leaders became a farce with many evil consequences throughout church history.

One example of such abuse is found in the person of Johann Tetzel, a Dominican monk. An account of this man and Martin Luther's opposition to him is found in an article listed on the Internet under the headings, "Lutherstadt Wittenberg, Sale of

¹⁷ 1 John 3:4.

Indulgence." The spelling, grammar, and punctuation are those of the author, Courtney Chandler.

Indulgence, as associated with penance, had developed and changed over the centuries. The sinner was to show remorse and declare that to the priest in confession in order to receive absolution and punishment. Buying letters of indulgence could replace the punishment. . .

By the late middle ages, the practice of selling indulgence had degenerated into impenetrably murky financial and political transactions. In response to the wildly growing financial needs of the Papal Court, church institutions were given the rights to sell letters of indulgence as punishment for sin.

. . . **Johann Tetzel**, an infamous Dominican monk, used these instructions to work his way through towns and villages north of Wittenberg in the lands of Magdeburg and Brandenburg where he ostentatiously sold indulgences. Soon all sorts of rumors about him were spreading around the area. It was said that Tetzel could sell indulgences for the sins of deceased friends and relatives; and who wanted a friend or relative to spend time in purgatory when it was so easy to get them into paradise? It was also said that Tetzel could sell indulgence for sins one was going to commit in the future; can you imagine a better life insurance?¹⁸

Ms Chandler goes on to explain that it was such abuse that caused men like Martin Luther to speak out against the selling of indulgences. However, it was not the original concept of indulgence to which Luther objected:

This 'christian' financial manipulation wasn't what angered Luther the most. It was the concept of indulgence, spread by Tetzel, which defied Luther's convictions. Luther believed that the sinful person ought to spend his/her life filled with remorse and in humility towards God's majesty. Tetzel's wares promised a comfortable and superficial life along a false path which was also offensive to God. In Luther's eyes it had to be put to a stop at once.

In his sermons, Luther had occasionally expressed his opinions against the misuse of indulgence. He warned that it was a breach of God's honor to buy indulgence without feeling true inner remorse and penance. In order to have the shameful works of the indulgence priests changed, he

¹⁸ "Lutherstadt Wittenberg, Sale of Indulgence" <http://www.wittenberg.de/e/seiten/ablass>
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turned to those responsible for writing up the instructions for the sale of indulgence, his church superiors, Bishop Hieronymus Schulze of Brandenburg and Archbishop Albrecht of Magedburg. On October 31, 1517 Luther wrote a letter to them, and possibly other bishops as well; the only letter preserved is the one to Archbishop Albrecht.

Luther foresaw the explosive effect of his letter, which was apparently written 'under fear, trembling and prayer' (Martin Brecht). He presented himself as a representative of the Bishop and Pope; that should be seen as his hope that they would stop the sale of indulgence, rather than as cunning and conniving on Luther's part. In his letter to Archbishop Albrecht, Luther included a copy of his 95 Theses; some critical questions were asked about the sale of indulgences without questioning indulgence on the whole, the church, its representatives or its doctrine of salvation. It was not chance, as one occasionally reads, that the fight over the sale of indulgence caused conflict with Rome. Without trying to, the Indulgence Theses had a more direct influence on changing the central power of the church than the theses about scholastic theology.¹⁹

Again, it was not the concept of indulgence that was of primary concern to Luther but the abuse of it and the idea that an indulgence need not be accompanied by repentance:

Buying letters of indulgence as punishment for sins was a popular way to clear one's conscience. These people then wanted Luther to absolve them, even though they felt no remorse for sins they had committed and had no intention of changing their ways...The church promised to scoff at the idea that people must experience sorrow and remorse, because its followers had the opportunity to buy indulgence which allowed them to have a clear conscience.²⁰

This concern of Martin Luther, the lack of any requirement of remorse or the need to change, is a major weakness in the *Indulgence Forgiveness* point of view. As we will see later, this is also a major weakness in *Existential Forgiveness* and its counterparts, *Sociological* and *Psychological Forgiveness*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

When comparing the types of forgiveness thus far listed: *Sociological*, *Psychological*, and *Existential Forgiveness* with *Indulgence Forgiveness*, even though they are at opposite ends of our continuum, in some respects they are similar. First, each view sees man as the source or agent of forgiveness. In the case of *Sociological*, *Psychological*, and *Existential Forgiveness*, the offended party is viewed as the one providing the forgiveness and hence the burden of forgiving is impressed upon the aggrieved party whether or not the offender has repented or that justice has been served by providing restitution for losses incurred.

If there is any attempt to be consistent with the teachings of the Bible when defining forgiveness, reference is usually made to Jesus' teachings in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus taught, "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."²¹ It is often supposed that, by this statement, Jesus is placing the burden of forgiveness on the offended party irrespective of the presence of repentance and restitution on the part of the offender. As we will see further on, this is a misapplication of Jesus' teaching because it ignores the basic context of Scripture from which any authoritative definition of forgiveness is to be drawn.

In the case of *Indulgence Forgiveness*, authority rests with men as representatives of God on earth who are the source and agents of forgiveness. According to this view, the aggrieved party is not the individual experiencing the loss as much as it is the Church whose testimony has been besmirched and God whose righteous standards have been violated. The sins committed have undermined the universal order established by God,

²¹ Matthew 6:14-15.

and it is up to the Church to set right this universal order.²² Therefore, it is not the aggrieved party nor God who is granting forgiveness but the Bishop who stands in the place of God and represents the Church. Any relationship between the offender and the offended is ignored, and there is no attempt to achieve a just settlement between them.

This similarity between *Existential Forgiveness* and its counterparts on the one hand and *Indulgence Forgiveness* on the other renders all of them ineffective in the area of conflict management. The practical result is that forgiveness is obtained without the need for repentance on the part of the offender nor is restitution to the injured party required. This renders each of these types of forgiveness unworkable in most conflict management situations. Any process of managing the conflict is short circuited before it begins or is side tracked from the goal of conflict management very early, that goal being a just and equitable solution among opposing parties.

BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS DEFINED

The types of forgiveness presented thus far each have their positive and negative points. To be sure, there are benefits to society when forgiveness is granted and received. There are also psychological benefits to the individual who is able to forgive. It is also important that we define ourselves in terms of forgiveness so that forgiveness is a part of our essence as *Existential Forgiveness* suggests. It is this last point that becomes vital to a correct understanding of biblical forgiveness. Being a forgiver does not define forgiveness. Sociological benefits, psychological benefits, and existential benefits are the result of and not a definition of forgiveness.

²² See the reference to "perturbation" in the above quote on page 15.

The Biblical Terms Used in the Bible

A careful reading of the Old Testament reveals that forgiveness has to do with God's moral standard as revealed through the Law and the Prophets. The Hebrew terms for forgiveness, נָשָׂא (nasa') and חָלַח (chalch), both involve God's forgiveness of sin, the former through the removal of the guilt and the latter through the act of sprinkling or pouring out blood. A third term, כָּפַר (kaphar), means to cover and, with reference to sin, to cover with blood. These three terms are representative of the Old Testament concept of forgiveness. God was the agent providing forgiveness which was necessitated by any breach of His holy standard set forth in the Law and the Prophets.

In the New Testament, the Greek terms for forgiveness have similar connotations. The root meaning of the most common term, ἀφίημι (aphiēmi), is "to send away."²³ A derivative, ἀφεσις (aphesis), means to release and in reference to forgiveness, to release from the guilt of sin.

It is thought by some that God's forgiveness of sin in the Old Testament was somehow different from forgiveness in the New Testament. Those who hold such a view insist that forgiveness in the Old Testament amounted to God passing over the sins but that they were not actually forgiven until the New Testament. However, a careful review of each occurrence of ἀφεσις (aphesis) in the New Testament as it applies to forgiveness indicates no such difference. Peter states, "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."²⁴

²³ Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, Electronic Database Copyright © 1985 by Thomas Nelson Publishers. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

²⁴ Acts 10:43.

Therefore, the only substantive difference between forgiveness in the Old Testament and forgiveness in the New is that the Old Testament saints were looking ahead to a promised redeemer who would save them from their sins while the New Testament saints look back to a crucified redeemer.

In Luke 6:37 we find the term, Ἀπολῶ (apolō), which means "to release." This is the only place where this term is translated "forgive" in the King James Version. A similar term, Ἀπολούω (apolouō), is found only twice, once in Acts 22:16 and again in 1 Corinthians 6:11. In both instances the picture is the washing away of sin through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

From this overview of both the Old Testament and New Testament terms for forgiveness we see that biblical forgiveness first and foremost is the release and removal of the guilt of sin which is incurred through the violation of God's moral standard. This is why when David confessed his sin of adultery to God he prayed, "Against you, you only, I have sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified when you speak and blameless when you judge."²⁵

Next we see that biblical forgiveness is primarily an act of God. Any thought that men could somehow grant absolution is nowhere stated or implied. In the Old Testament, the Aaronic Priesthood is never said to be the source or agent of forgiveness even in their role as God's representatives on earth. This is seen in the fact that the high priest on the day of atonement had to first offer a sacrifice for his own sins before he could offer sacrifices for the people.

²⁵ Psalm 51:4.

Moses then said to Aaron, "Come near to the altar and offer your sin offering and your burnt offering, that you may make atonement for yourself and for the people; then make the offering for the people, that you may make atonement for them, just as the LORD has commanded."²⁶

"Then Aaron shall offer the bull of the sin offering which is for himself and make atonement for himself and for his household, and he shall slaughter the bull of the sin offering which is for himself."²⁷

"When he goes in to make atonement in the holy place, no one shall be in the tent of meeting until he comes out, that he may make atonement for himself and for his household and for all the assembly of Israel."²⁸

"He shall bathe his body with water in a holy place and put on his clothes, and come forth and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people and make atonement for himself and for the people."²⁹

...and make atonement for the holy sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar. He shall also make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly."³⁰

Much of the discussion regarding exactly what role the sacrificial system played in forgiveness in the Old Testament overlooks one important principle, that it is God who forgives. This is why the Jews were astonished when Jesus pronounced forgiveness during His ministry here on earth. Matthew records:

And they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, "Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven." And some of the scribes said to themselves, "This {fellow} blasphemes." And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, "Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, and walk'? "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"-- then He said to the paralytic, "Get up, pick up your bed and go home."³¹

²⁶ Leviticus 9:7.

²⁷ Leviticus 16:11.

²⁸ Leviticus 16:17.

²⁹ Leviticus 16:24.

³⁰ Leviticus 16:33.

³¹ Matthew 9:2-6.

In the Old Testament, the priests represented God on earth. However, they never took this role to themselves of their own volition. It was God who chose them as descendents of Levi and Aaron. The writer to the book of Hebrews underscores this truth:

For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins; he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness; and because of it he is obligated to offer {sacrifices} for sins, as for the people, so also for himself. And no one takes the honor to himself, but {receives it} when he is called by God, even as Aaron was.³³

In the New Testament, every believer is a priest and therefore has the right and obligation to offer forgiveness to men. Peter writes, "But you are a CHOSEN RACE, a royal PRIESTHOOD, a HOLY NATION, a PEOPLE FOR {God's} OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light,"³⁴

The primary duties of a priest are to offer sacrifices. In the Old Testament this involved sacrifices for sin. However these sacrifices were only a type of the single sacrifice of Christ which is the antitype. Since the type is never as great as the antitype,³⁵ it is logically and theologically correct to assume that the sacrifices offered by the priests in the Old Testament did not provide the final price for sin as did the one sacrifice of Jesus in the New Testament.

³² Matthew 9:2-6.

³³ Hebrews 5:1-4.

³⁴ 1 Peter 2:9.

³⁵ Paul Lee Tan, The Interpretation of Prophecy, (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1974), 169, 170.

As we have already seen, the basis for forgiveness in the Old Testament was not the sacrifices offered by the Priests but the promise of a future sacrifice which God would provide, the sacrifice of His Son. Therefore, it was not the priests who were issuing absolution by the sacrifices they offered but God on the basis of His promise.

The Catholic Church teaches that the obligation to forgive is the responsibility of a special priesthood beginning with Peter and passed down through apostolic succession to the Pope and his appointees today. In fact, responsibility to offer God's forgiveness is passed from Peter to every believer because every believer is a priest. Therefore, in the New Testament every individual who is born again has the responsibility to offer God's forgiveness to men.

"I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."³⁶

"Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."³⁷

And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. "If you forgive the sins of any, {their sins} have been forgiven them; if you retain the {sins} of any, they have been retained."³⁸

"Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses."³⁹

³⁶ Matthew 16:18-19.

³⁷ Matthew 18:18.

³⁸ John 20:22-23.

³⁹ Acts 13:38-39.

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.⁴⁰

. . . bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.⁴¹

While we may correctly speak of men forgiving men, it is important to remember that biblical forgiveness is not simply horizontal. It refers to God forgiving men. Therefore, when biblical forgiveness is offered to men by Christians, it is God's forgiveness with the Christian merely as the channel for that forgiveness. This is why it is so important for any Christian who seeks to perform the role of a conflict manager to understand what biblical forgiveness is. We must see that it is based upon the absolute moral standard of God. The need for forgiveness arises when that standard is broken by an act of men. Biblical forgiveness is the granting of release from the guilt of that action by God through His people on earth.

When we understand true biblical forgiveness and serve as channels of His forgiveness, much of the emotional and psychological stress is eliminated. This will be discussed more fully later on. The following personal experience will help to clarify the important application of biblical forgiveness.

Many years ago, I was called to the bedside of a man who was dying. I had never met the man before and so did not know what his relationship with God was. Knowing that his time on earth was short, the man would not let me leave his bedside until he had confessed his sins and asked Jesus to be his Savior and to receive him into heaven.

⁴⁰ Ephesians 4:32.

⁴¹ Colossians 3:13.

I went away thinking that my role had been accomplished. It was a thrill to witness genuine faith and repentance and to provide to this individual assurance of God's forgiveness and his salvation. I went back to my office to wait for the inevitable, the call that would take me back to be with him as he left his physical home for glory.

A few hours later I was urgently summoned back to the hospital. Before I arrived the man entered his heavenly home. Yet I was much disturbed by the attitude of the woman I had taken to be his wife. She was in hysterics and would not be comforted. When I questioned her about her lack of peace and joy at this man's conversion, she replied that her fear and consternation stemmed from her relationship to the man. They had lived together for years without being married.

As I counseled this woman and helped her with the myriad of details that often follow a sudden and unexpected death, her fear of God's judgment turned into rejection of any thought that her relationship with the deceased was in anyway wrong. After all, the reason they never married was because her first husband had left her with a comfortable pension and the man who had just died had neither retirement income or social security. Had they married she would have lost everything. Her defiant challenge to me was to find fault with their course of action. Surely God would not condemn her for this.

Over the course of many days I gently reminded her that, as God's representative I had a duty to uphold His righteous standard. As a man, I could understand and even wanted to forgive her but it was not my forgiveness that she needed. At the memorial service the verse I chose for my text was Psalm 130:3, 4, "If you, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, that you may be feared."

A few weeks went by and others in the church continued to minister to this woman in various ways. Then one day I was asked to meet with her again. Her immediate request of me was, "Tell me again how I can receive God's forgiveness." After I shared some verses of Scripture with her, she gave her life to the Lord and received His forgiveness. I do not believe this would have taken place had I offered her some form of absolution without her first seeing the need to repent and to seek God's forgiveness.

THE PLACE FOR REPENTANCE AND RESTITUTION IN BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS

One of the most difficult issues any Christian conflict manager will face with regard to forgiveness is the assumption of many today that biblical forgiveness does not require repentance or restitution. Here are some examples of this view.

Forgiveness is the responsibility of the offended. To forgive is to surrender all claims for payment. To forgive means we do not acquire any money or words or actions. It means there will be no continuing resentment or bitterness toward the offender. At its root, forgiveness means, "to let go."⁴²

To be fair, the writer goes on to present a very good explanation of forgiveness and restoration. However, it is the definition he gives for forgiveness that is troublesome because it forms the starting point of his argument. Many begin and end there and never come to an understanding of the place for repentance and restitution in biblical forgiveness. Another example:

Forgiveness is an expression of love that takes the initiative. Have you ever thought, *Why should I forgive her, she hasn't sought forgiveness?* God's love, however, compels us to take the first step. . . If God had waited

⁴² Leith Anderson, "Does Forgiveness Require Restoration?" Moody, June 1986, 33.

for us to repent and ask His forgiveness, we would still be lost. And if you wait for another to confess first and seek your forgiveness, you're letting him control your life.⁴³

In this statement Josh McDowell, who otherwise is an excellent Bible expositor, mixes a definition of forgiveness with how forgiveness is to be expressed. This leads him, along with many other well-meaning writers, into trouble when seeking to explain the apparent contradiction presented by our Lord's statement in Matthew 6:14, 15 where Jesus says, "But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." Because of the confusion between the definition of forgiveness and the expression of forgiveness, a false dichotomy is implied. In an attempt to avoid this seeming paradox, Josh writes:

This seems to say our own forgiveness is based on our forgiving others, not on God's grace in Christ. But that would contradict the rest of Christ's teachings. Instead, I believe Jesus is saying if we refuse to forgive someone who's wronged us, God will know our own confession of sins to Him is less than genuine—that we haven't fully received the forgiveness He has freely made available.⁴⁴

Josh's words regarding forgiveness in this article are valuable. Like the previous author, what is troubling is his starting point. His definition of forgiveness is misleading. He mingles the concepts of love and reconciliation with the definition of forgiveness.

In a similar manner, Wendell E. Miller makes the same mistake but takes the point to an illogical extreme.

What Forgiveness Is: Forgiveness is an act of the will in which a person relinquishes any "right" to get even with an offender. It does not necessarily have anything to do with "feeling" that the person has been

⁴³ Josh McDowell, "Bypassing the Roadblocks to Forgiving." Moody, October 1985, 109.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

forgiven. Again, it is an act of the will, relinquishing the "right" to "get even."

If another person asks to be forgiven, then, in saying, "Yes, I forgive you," *all* right to "get even," or even to remind the offender of his previous offense, or to talk to others about it, is relinquished. Instead, the forgiven offender must be treated *as if* the offense had been forgotten.

Even if the offender does not ask for forgiveness, God's command is to forgive (see Mark 11:25). This means praying and relinquishing to God, the "right" to "get even." Actually, we have no "right" to "get even." God reserves to Himself the right to settle all accounts (see Rom. 12:19).

As an example of forgiveness, imagine that I owed you a sum of money, and you came to me to be paid. I gave you a long hard-luck story; and you sat quietly, not believing my story. Then I asked you to forgive me the debt. You thought to yourself, He will never pay me; so I will not lose anything by saying that I forgive him the debt. So begrudgingly you said, "Yes, I forgive you." As you left the office, you got very angry at yourself for saying that you would forgive the debt. In a few days you decided to try again to get me to pay you. So you came in and asked to be paid. Then I said, "I do not owe you any money."⁴⁵

In the above example, the author begins with a poorly conceived definition of forgiveness and then takes it to its illogical limits and by so doing opens the Bible and the Author of the Bible up to ridicule. All sense of fairness is lost. The ultimate goal is to achieve forgiveness at any cost instead of emphasizing biblical forgiveness that was obtained at great cost. Forgiveness is viewed as an act of human will alone and not an act of God's will. Because of this common error of confusing definition with expression, the gospel of Jesus Christ is rejected by many today as unjust. Confusion reigns among God's people who are to be the ambassadors for God presenting biblical forgiveness to a world in need of it.

⁴⁵ Wendell E. Miller, "Is Forgiving Forgetting?" Family and Home, March 1986, 46.

Fred Keene in an article on the Internet titled, "The Politics of Forgiveness: How the Christian Church Guilt-Trips Survivors," expresses his distaste for the forgiveness he perceives the Christian Church offering.

WHILE STILL AN ADOLESCENT, MY WIFE, HANNAH, WAS SEXUALLY ABUSED OVER A PERIOD OF MONTHS BY HER EPISCOPAL PRIEST. Hannah describes the pressure to forgive as coming from her upbringing within a Christian church. All her life she was taught that she was to forgive those who did bad things to her. Then, when something terrible happened, she was the one who felt guilty, because she could not forgive the man who abused her in his authority as her priest. . .

Many Christian clergy interpret the Bible to mean that survivors of child abuse, battery, and sexual assault are somehow supposed to forgive the perpetrator. Many psychologists and therapists follow suit. Add in the voices of popular advice columnists (Dear Abby and Ann Landers), TV talk-show hosts (Oprah Winfrey), self-help gurus (Marianne Williamson, John Bradshaw, et al.), and it seems as if everyone in the world believes the same dictum: If you have been abused, you should find it in your heart to forgive your abuser. And if you cannot, there is something wrong with you; you are not a good person. . .

The idea of forgiveness is one of the most difficult issues with which survivors of sexual or domestic violence must deal. Almost from the first impact of the event, they are under social pressure to forgive. The pressure is doubled if they belong to a church or seek counseling from a Christian priest or pastor. For religious Christian survivors, such counsel adds horrible complications to the healing process. But even in its secular form, the pressure to forgive abusers is a powerful tool of social control, one that continues to blame the victim. . .

The virtue of "forgiving those who harm us" is part of Christianity's pervasive legacy to Western culture. It is invariably attributed to the teachings of Jesus as found in the Christian Bible. Ironically, though, there is absolutely no scriptural basis for this notion of interpersonal forgiveness.

What the New Testament does say is that people with more power should forgive people with less power -- or, as in the case of the first-century Christian communities, people should forgive each other because they are social equals ("brothers and sisters"). Nowhere in the Christian Bible is forgiveness even discussed, much less required, when the person who is harmed is less powerful than the person doing the harming.

There are three words used in the New Testament for the verb "to forgive," (Readers of the original Greek texts would recognize them as

aphiemi, charizomai, and apoluo.) These three words -- especially aphiemi, the one most commonly used for interpersonal forgiveness -- are the same words used for acts of absolving a debt or releasing a prisoner. These are financial and judicial acts, and the capacity to perform them could only belong to more powerful people in the society.

There is no instance in the New Testament of a person's being "forgiven" by someone lower in the power hierarchy. In fact, it was probably impossible. New Testament society was extremely hierarchical, and someone with greater power in the relationship could perform an act of forgiveness.

Even the Lord's Prayer, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, asks God to "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." The forgiveness clearly flows downward -- from God through the petitioner to the debtor. (And in Jesus' time forgiving a balance due was no small matter: A debtor could legally be sold into debt-slavery.)

When Jesus forgave people, it was always as a more powerful person. As an honored teacher, for example, in one of his most famous such acts, he forgave the sins of a prostitute. The only time Jesus was in a less powerful position was on the cross. There, according to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus himself did not forgive the people who were killing him. Linguistically and politically, he was in no position to do so. All he could do was to take a pass on the forgiveness question and hand it upstairs to God.

If Jesus never said to forgive those more powerful, then why is the idea of unconditional, bottom-up forgiveness so firmly embedded in church teaching?⁴⁶

I have taken the time to reprint so much of this article, not because I agree with its conclusions, but because it raises a very important question regarding biblical forgiveness. It underscores the damage cause by glib, inaccurate, and sometimes thoroughly wrong concepts of forgiveness. Instead of playing with cotton balls, we are playing with fire. To teach or even represent a forgiveness that is not consistently biblical throughout and therefore just in every respect, is to risk turning away those who

⁴⁶ Fred Keene, "The Politics of Forgiveness: How the Christian Church Guilt-trips Survivors. The Internet, December 1, 1998.

desperately need to give and to receive God's forgiveness. When we ignore the issue of repentance and restitution in forgiveness, we offer a man-centered, unworkable, and downright unjust form of forgiveness.

This was seen recently in the case of Karla Faye Tucker, known as the Pickax Queen. She, along with a boy friend, Daniel Garrett, killed two individuals in cold blood. For his part in the crime, an unrepentant Garrett was executed in 1993. However, Ms Tucker's appeals took longer. In the mean time, she experienced a jailhouse conversion and won the hearts of many Christians in her attempt to avoid the death penalty. U.S. News, in their online news service, Outlook, made the following observations:

Pleas for clemency have centered on the fact that Tucker, 38, has changed dramatically in the 14 years she has spent on death row. The daughter of a drug-addicted prostitute, Tucker became an addict herself at age 8 and a hooker at 13. Now she is a born-again Christian, active in prison ministry, she even married the prison chaplain while in prison. She is by all accounts a model prisoner, a bright and articulate woman whose television interviews have put an uncomfortable and real face on the death penalty. Mercy is warranted in this case, her supporters say, because Tucker can be an asset to society if she is allowed to live.⁴⁷

This case gained national attention with Karla Faye, along with many professing Christians, appealing for a stay of execution on the grounds that she was born-again and therefore forgiven. The world watched as many who had for years clamored for the death penalty, which in their view is a biblical teaching, were now seeking to set aside the death penalty on the grounds of forgiveness. To its credit, the news media did not make an issue of the fact that the chaplain of the prison went further than anyone and married her knowing full well her guilt and the just penalty she would probably receive. This points out the importance of correctly defining biblical forgiveness and the need for restitution

in this life. Ms Tucker may in fact have received forgiveness but the crime she committed still required the death penalty in order for justice to be served.

Paul wrote:

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.⁴⁸

Paul's teaching is consistent with the Old Testament admonition to Aaron not to grieve for his sons when God executed them before his eyes?

Then Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, "Do not uncover your heads nor tear your clothes, so that you will not die and that He will not become wrathful against all the congregation. But your kinsmen, the whole house of Israel, shall bewail the burning which the LORD has brought about. You shall not even go out from the doorway of the tent of meeting, or you will die; for the LORD'S anointing oil is upon you." So they did according to the word of Moses.⁴⁹

In another context, the Children of Israel are warned against showing pity to one who has given false testimony.

"If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing, then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who will be {in office} in those days. The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness {and} he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother. Thus you shall purge the

⁴⁷ Dan McGraw, "When is forgiveness unforgivable?" U.S. News: Outlook, February 2, 1998.

⁴⁸ Romans 13:1-5.

⁴⁹ Leviticus 10:6-7.

evil from among you. The rest will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you. Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."⁵⁰

Many would argue that this is Old Testament Law and that it is no longer valid today. If this is so then God was an unrighteous judge then or else He is a weak and uncaring judge now. Consider the number of times in the book of Deuteronomy, particularly chapters 21 and 22, where individuals were required to pay restitution for the losses they caused to others.

To give a clearer picture of the importance of restitution in God's forgiveness, think of the law concerning the cities of refuge in Numbers 35, Deuteronomy 19:1-13; and Joshua 20. These cities, six in all, were chosen from among the cities given to the tribe of Levi for their personal possession. The purpose of the cities of refuge was to provide a safe haven for anyone who might have accidentally killed another person. In every situation where one person caused the death of another, the family of the victim had the right to kill the one responsible. God through Moses made it very clear that the right of the protection provided by the cities of refuge applied only to unintentional killing and was not to give safe haven to murderers. The reason for the cities of refuge was to prevent further bloodshed. Moses wrote, "So innocent blood will not be shed in the midst of your land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, and bloodguiltiness be on you."⁵¹

In incidents where the act was determined to be intentional, the cities were not to harbor the murderer but to exact swift judgment.

⁵⁰ Deuteronomy 19:16-21.

⁵¹ Deuteronomy 19:10.

But if there is a man who hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him and rises up against him and strikes him so that he dies, and he flees to one of these cities, then the elders of his city shall send and take him from there and deliver him into the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die. You shall not pity him, but you shall purge the blood of the innocent from Israel, that it may go well with you.⁵²

Think of the implications of the law of the cities of refuge to the priests in Israel in that day. They not only were responsible to judge the guilt or innocence of the individual but to house and feed the innocent person if necessary until the death of the High Priest who served at that time. There was no fuzzy thinking about forgiveness nor any pressure placed upon the blood avenger to ignore the tremendous loss. Instead, this law was an act of affirming the tremendous loss by the family and the justification on the part to the family to expect restitution, even the most extreme kind, the death of the manslayer who accidentally killed a family member.

The law of the cities of refuge also put the burden of determining fairly the merits of the case squarely on the priests by requiring them to provide for an indefinite period of time protection to the manslayer not guilty of murder. If Christian mediators today knew that they would be responsible not only to judge the merits of a conflict but also to assume the cost of restitution, there would probably be a lot more concern for restitution and how it is to be paid.

Was God unjust or accommodating petty tribal rivalry in permitting the right of the blood avenger and cities of refuge for individuals innocent of murder but guilty of manslaughter? I, for one, cannot conceive of God being unjust in any of His laws. Nor

⁵² Deuteronomy 19:11-13.

do I believe that He provided one standard in the Old Testament and another in the New Testament because He could not achieve true justice until a future time.

I present this consideration of the law of the cities of refuge here in order to set the stage for explaining an important point regarding the law of the sin offering. It is important to note that under the Mosaic Law any sacrifice, and especially the sin offering, could not be presented to God until repentance, confession of sin, and restitution had been made on the part of the individual offering the sacrifice. It is equally important to note that no offering was provided that would release a person from the consequences in this life of a deliberate act of sin. To demonstrate this we need to compare the law regarding the cities of refuge with other Scripture.

First, in the book of Leviticus and Numbers, God repeated over and over that the sacrifices offered by the people were for unintentional sins. The Hebrew term, שְׁגָגָה (shegagah), is variously translated, "through ignorance" (KJV,), "unintentionally" (NAS, NAU, NIV, TLB, NKJ), and "unwittingly" (ASV, RSV). This term applied to the חַטָּאת (chatta'ah) or sin offering. There was no offering for deliberate premeditated sin. When David committed adultery and murder, his response was, "For you do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; you are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."⁵³ Even though David avoided the death penalty which he deserved for these acts, a careful review of his life demonstrates that he did not escape the consequences of his sin.

This concept is underscored in Hebrews 10 where we read:

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on {the testimony of} two or three witnesses.⁵⁴

Here the writer is referring to consequences in this life and not the loss of eternal salvation. The issue of unintentional versus intentional sin is disregarded by many because of the statement by Samuel where he noted, "men look at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart."⁵⁵ To this is often added a reference to Jesus words in Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged." This statement in Matthew is not a prohibition from all forms of judging. Instead it is in a context where Jesus is teaching how to render proper judgment. The idea that it is impossible to determine whether or not a person is repentant and therefore beyond the responsibility of men to judge is nowhere supported in the Bible. This deduction by many is an amazing deduction due to the numerous passages in both the Old and New Testaments instructing us to judge one another.

From the contexts of the Old Testament law there appears to be four categories of judgment to be rendered regarding the guilt of the offender. Walter Kaiser, Jr. has provided excellent exposition regarding these passages and their significance to the matter of biblical forgiveness:

An alarmingly large number of students of the OT divide all sins into the two major headings of accidental and deliberate. The Psalmist enumerated three major headings in Psalm 19:12-13: "Who can discern his *errors* [*šgî'ôt*]? Cleanse me from my *hidden faults* [*nistārôt*].

⁵³ Psalm 51:16-17.

⁵⁴ Hebrews 10:26-28.

⁵⁵ 1 Samuel 16:7.

Restrain your servant from willful sins [*zēdīm*] (my translation). But if the first two categories of the Psalmist ("errors" and "hidden faults") are merely two subcategories of the "accidental" heading, as Jacob Milgrom concluded, then it is clear that so-called "sins in ignorance" are actually "sins of inadvertence." Thus, the designation "unwitting" (KJV, NJV, RSV "ignorance")—i.e., "without wit," "without consciousness"—is impossible. The sins of *segagah* are acts of negligence; the offender knows the law but violates it accidentally and without malice aforethought (e.g., in the case of accidental homicide—Num 35:22ff; Deut 19:4-10; Josh 20:2-6, 9). There is also the sin of inadvertence, where the person acts without fully knowing all the facts—the ignorance was not about the law but about the circumstances—such as in the case of Abimelech's taking Sarah, whom he thought was Abraham's sister (Gen 20:9), or when Balaam was unaware that an angel was in the donkey's path (Num 22:34: "I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road"). Thus, the sinner who commits a sin of inadvertence is conscious of the act, even if he or she is not always aware of its consequences. . .

The sin of a "high hand" (*bēadrāmāh*, Num 15:17-36) is, in our view, something altogether different from the previous categories. It involved blasphemy against the Lord and contempt of the Word of God (Num 15:30-31).⁵⁶

Kaiser goes on to apply this fourth category, "the sin of a high hand" to the unpardonable sin in the New Testament, a view I do not hold. His conclusion is drawn from his belief that the sacrifices for sin in the Old Testament were efficacious. Kaiser writes:

The only solution is to take both the OT and NT statements seriously. We conclude then, with Hobart Freeman, that the OT sacrifices were *subjectively efficacious*, in that the sinner did receive full relief based on the clear declaration of God's appointed servant. But it is just as clear that the sacrifices of bulls and goats *were not in themselves* expiatory and efficacious. The most these sacrifices could do was to point to the need for a perfect, living substitute who would, in the timing of God, ransom and deliver all from the debt, guilt, and effects of their sins. Thus, the OT sacrifices were not *objectively* efficacious; but then neither did the OT

⁵⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 131-132.

ever claim that the blood of these bulls and goats was inherently effective.⁵⁷

Contrary to Dr. Kaiser's statement above, it was not the sacrifices of the people that were efficacious in any way so as somehow to buy forgiveness. It was the heart attitude—an attitude of repentance and a willingness to pay restitution—that qualified the individual to receive God's forgiveness. Kaiser's explanation is too laborious and still amounts to two types of forgiveness, one for the Old Testament and one for the New.

This is not the time or place to give a detailed rebuttal to Kaiser's view of the efficacy of the Old Testament sacrifices. However, he has provided a valuable service in that he clearly supports the idea that repentance and restitution were necessary for biblical forgiveness in the Old Testament. He states, "Accordingly, only those who had inwardly prepared their hearts were eligible to receive the gracious gift of God's forgiveness."⁵⁸

A further word is in order regarding restitution. Restitution was required whether or not the act causing the loss was intentional. One passage in the Old Testament firmly establishes that restitution for losses incurred was always in order.

"Speak to the sons of Israel, "When a man or woman commits any of the sins of mankind, acting unfaithfully against the LORD, and that person is guilty, then he shall confess his sins which he has committed, and he shall make restitution in full for his wrong and add to it one-fifth of it, and give {it} to him whom he has wronged. "But if the man has no relative to whom restitution may be made for the wrong, the restitution which is made for the wrong {must go} to the LORD for the priest, besides the ram of atonement, by which atonement is made for him."⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid, 134.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 133.

⁵⁹ Numbers 5:6-8.

Someone might argue, "But that is the Old Testament. In the New Testament we are under grace, not the Law." Some even go so far as to deny the need for repentance let alone restitution in the New Testament. Yet there is never any indication that the requirements of the Old Testament law, repentance and restitution, were somehow set aside after the death of Christ on the cross. Instead, Paul writes:

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God {did:} sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and {as an offering} for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.⁶⁰

By this he does not mean that the need for repentance and restitution was eliminated by the death of Christ on the cross. If anything, God has set a higher standard for the New Testament saint. We see this raising of the standard in Matthew 6 where Jesus chastens the Jews by saying:

"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others {to do} the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches {them} he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses {that} of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."⁶¹

Jesus went on to list several ways that the Jews were seeking to avoid the requirements of the law. In the same context, Jesus placed the burden of reconciliation upon the offender by saying that he should not think he could present an offering to God

⁶⁰ Romans 8:1-4.

⁶¹ Matthew 5:17-20.

if he has not first made things right with his brother.⁶² In the verse preceding this context, Jesus instructs His followers to let their light shine in the world.⁶³ When we view forgiveness as a way to avoid just compensation for losses incurred, how is this showing our light? Does it not have the opposite affect, hiding the light?

Luke records a dialogue between a lawyer and Jesus in which the lawyer challenged Jesus regarding His teaching. The dialogue went like this:

And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" And he answered, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND; AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE."⁶⁴

The lawyer's question betrays a certain cynicism toward Jesus because he must have thought he already had inherited eternal life. His immediate attempt to defend himself demonstrates this to be the case. This lawyer was an expert in the Law of Moses and undoubtedly was meticulous in keeping it. Jesus turned the tables on him by answering his question with a question, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?"

The lawyer's answer reveals that the Jews did see the connection between the parts of the law having to do with their vertical relationship with God and the parts of the law having to do with the horizontal relationships with their fellow men. Therefore, this connection was neither a new concept with Jesus nor would the death of Jesus abolish

⁶² Matthew 5:23-26.

⁶³ Matthew 5:16.

⁶⁴ Luke 10:25-28.

this connection. The lawyer recognized that the trap he had set for Jesus was about to spring shut on him because the Jews had long since formulated elaborate schemes designed to relieve themselves of having to keep certain parts of the law. Luke records, "But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"⁶⁵

What follows is the parable of the Good Samaritan. In it Jesus implicates both the Levites and the priests for their lack of concern for the needs of an injured countryman. In this parable, one who was considered an outcast and cursed by the Jews, the Samaritan, demonstrated greater adherence to the Law than did those who claimed to uphold it. The application of the story for our purpose here is that we should not be satisfied with trying to justify ourselves before God through some contrived system of forgiveness which, in our minds meets the requirements for justification before God without repentance and restitution. Instead, we must seek justice wherever possible and even go beyond it to assist in restoring to the injured party his losses even when we are not to blame for those losses.

A popular theme being promoted today is fasting. Many Bible teachers are promoting this practice as a way of drawing closer to God. The history of fasting in the Bible is an interesting one and sheds light on the importance God places on seeking justice in this world. Immediately following the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar's army, Israel instituted an elaborate system of fasting to justify themselves before God and to take the place of the sacrificial system disrupted because of their disobedience. These fasts continued throughout the exile. However, it was not

⁶⁵ Luke 10:29.

God's idea, and He would later scold them through Zechariah the Prophet for their presumption that fasting could replace obedience and justice. Zechariah wrote:

"Say to all the people of the land and to the priests, "When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted? "When you eat and drink, do you not eat for yourselves and do you not drink for yourselves?"⁶⁶

Years before God, through the prophet Isaiah, warned them regarding their duplicity. This passage from Isaiah 58 is quoted in its entirety because it conveys the true concern of God for the practical righteousness only a concern for justice, repentance, and restitution can bring to His people whether in the Old Testament or in the Church today.

"Cry loudly, do not hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet, and declare to My people their transgression and to the house of Jacob their sins. "Yet they seek me day by day and delight to know My ways, as a nation that has done righteousness and has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They ask me {for} just decisions, they delight in the nearness of God. "Why have we fasted and you do not see? {Why} have we humbled ourselves and you do not notice?" Behold, on the day of your fast you find {your} desire, and drive hard all your workers. "Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist. You do not fast like {you do} today to make your voice heard on high. "Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one's head like a reed and for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the LORD? "Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? "Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? "Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. "Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry, and He will say, "Here I am.' If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, And if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom {will become} like midday. "And the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to

⁶⁶ Zechariah 7:5-6.

your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail. "Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; you will raise up the age-old foundations; and you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell.

"If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your {own} pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy {day} of the LORD honorable, and honor it, desisting from your {own} ways, from seeking your {own} pleasure and speaking {your own} word, Then you will take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you {with} the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."⁶⁷

Forgiveness was never meant to be a shortcut to peace or a substitute for justice among men. Biblical forgiveness is the release God gives from the penalty of sin when we violate His absolute moral standards. An integral part of biblical forgiveness is a concern for justice among men. It was never meant to be a substitution for justice nor a way to assuage one's conscience apart from practical righteousness. Every Christian mediator must understand this going into a conflict situation. There are no shortcuts to peace without repentance and restitution for wrongs committed. Consider Jesus' statement in Matthew 6:14-15, "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." In its dispensational context, we see that He is reaffirming the Old Testament truth that God is concerned about justice among men. Without it, there is no true forgiveness.

Before leaving the matter of repentance and restitution, we need to distinguish the difference between the biblical application of this and what is taught in *Indulgence Forgiveness*. Insisting that biblical forgiveness includes repentance and restitution is not

⁶⁷ Isaiah 58:1-14.

the same as offering indulgences. In granting indulgences, the individual receiving the indulgence is, on the one hand, buying forgiveness from God and/or His representative the priest and, on the other hand, buying relief from the need for repentance and restitution. The truth of this statement can be seen by further reference to the teaching of the Catholic Church:

As to Indulgence. The power to forgive sins necessarily included the power to remit the eternal punishment due to them. But there remains temporal punishment. But besides the power to forgive sins and their eternal punishment Christ also gave his Church the power to remit temporal punishment for sins.

. . . Thus, the twofold basis of the doctrine of indulgences is: first, the satisfying and supernaturally meritorious value of all works done in a state of grace, and second, the community of saints, of all, that is, who have been redeemed by Christ and live and work in his grace, in communion with Christ and with one another.

. . . THE CHURCH THUS TEACHES: The Church, then, teaches she has received from Christ, on the basis of the treasury of his merits, the power to grant to the faithful on certain conditions indulgences i.e. the remission of temporal punishment due to sin. Indulgences may be applied to the dead. Abuses are to be avoided. The use of indulgences is salutary for the people of Christ.⁶⁸ (Punctuation and formatting theirs)

By their own teaching on indulgences, the Catholic Church sees the amount paid as purchasing the forgiveness. Hence often there is relief from the need to pay restitution. Biblical forgiveness does not set aside the need to repent or the need, where possible, to make restitution to the offended party.

THE ROLE OF PERSONAL FORGIVENESS IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Our purpose is not to set forth a systematic theology of forgiveness but to establish a working definition of forgiveness and to apply this to conflict management. I

⁶⁸ "Indulgences," 1997, 1998 [Catholic Online](#). All Rights Reserved. (Internet: December 30, 1998), 1.

have purposely left any discussion of the personal aspect of forgiveness, either receiving or granting it, until now because a clearer understand of biblical forgiveness will render the personal application of forgiveness easier to understand and easier to achieve.

Forgiveness Personally Received

Biblical forgiveness refers primarily to the act of God granting to men release from the guilt of sin on the basis of Christ's death on the cross. The Bible teaches that there has and ever will be only one Man who ever lived who is the source and agent of biblical forgiveness. This is Jesus Christ. "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."⁶⁹ It is equally important to note that His one sacrifice on the cross is the only thing that provides propitiation for sins:

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for {those of} the whole world.⁷⁰

Therefore, when referring to personal forgiveness received, the first thing to note is that any forgiveness that does not meet the criterion set forth above is not biblical forgiveness. By this I mean that if a person receives forgiveness from another person without this vertical connection with God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ, then it is merely human forgiveness. Human forgiveness is commendable and even profitable. However, any conflict management that is worthy to be called Christian will be directly associated with God's forgiveness. On the other hand, if all that can be achieved in a

⁶⁹ Acts 4:12.

⁷⁰ I John 2:1-2.

conflict situation is human forgiveness, then so be it. Yet the conflict manager must realize that the results are, at the very least, second best.

The Two-fold Results of Personal Forgiveness Received

When biblical forgiveness is received, two very important results should be seen. First, the one forgiven becomes a forgiver by nature; and, second, the one forgiven has an attitude of repentance and is willing to pay restitution where possible.

Jesus makes it very clear that the one who has received forgiveness from God must be willing, in return, to grant forgiveness to those who have injured him. This is the whole point of the parable of the unrighteous slave in Matthew 18:23-35. Josh McDowell's comment that not forgiving someone means "God will know our own confession of sins to Him is less than genuine—that we haven't fully received the forgiveness He has freely made available" (see page 30) does not go far enough in explaining Jesus' comments in Matthew 6:14, 15. His problem is that he views forgiveness as a feeling rather than as an action taken. Biblical forgiveness may be accompanied by strong positive emotions just as not forgiving is usually coupled with strong negative emotions. However, forgiveness is not an emotion. It is an act of the will similar to ἀγαπή (agapē). Ἀγαπή (agapē), the Greek word most often rendered "love" in the New Testament, is not simply an emotion. It is an act of the will whereby the one doing the action chooses to do for the other person what God wants him to do. In the same way when forgiveness is expressed by a human being, assuming that it is biblical forgiveness, it is the conscious act of releasing the offending party from the guilt of the offending action based upon the forgiveness that has been sought and received from God.

This clarification should rid this whole matter of forgiveness of the fuzzy-feely thinking about forgiveness so popular today. The unrighteous slave, whose large debt was forgiven, failed to recognize what true forgiveness is and demonstrated his failure by not seeing the need to forgive those who owed him a little money. In the parable, the subject was money. However, in the application, the subject is salvation. The individual who receives genuine forgiveness and therefore is born again becomes a forgiver by nature and action. This connection between character and action is found in the immediate context of Matthew chapters 5 and 6.

In Matthew 5, Jesus is teaching regarding the proper application of the Law, the requirements of which should never be set aside and which are only fulfilled by faith in Christ. Hatred of a brother indicates a heart full of murder. A mind full of pornography demonstrates a heart full of adultery. Making vows and breaking them indicates the presence of evil in one's life. Hating one's enemy indicates a failure to love one's neighbor. Likewise, failing to forgive others indicates one has not truly received forgiveness from God. In every one of these examples, practice demonstrates the existence or absence of genuine character.

Jesus does not mean that we receive forgiveness by forgiving. Instead, as in the example of the requirement to love one's enemy, by forgiving we prove that our true character is like God's character. Jesus' application in verse 45 can properly be applied to the entire section, "so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on {the} evil and {the} good, and sends rain on {the} righteous and {the} unrighteous."⁷¹ It is a serious matter when God's people say either that they cannot

⁷¹ Matthew 5:45.

or will not forgive another. This denial is a denial of the truth that they have received forgiveness from God.

In the matter of repentance and restitution, it is true that the forgiveness received from God is purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross, nothing less or more. It is also true that forgiveness is received through our repentance and through making restitution where possible of the loss we have caused others. The act of repenting and making restitution is faith acted out even as faith is the channel by which we received grace from God according to Paul in Ephesians 2:8, 9.

Luke's account of Zaccheus is a great one to demonstrate this. Luke tells us that those witnessing the interaction between Zaccheus and Jesus grumbled because of who they perceived Zaccheus to be, a sinner in their eyes. Yet Zaccheus offered, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much."⁷² There is no indication in this context that Jesus had told him to do this. Instead, Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham."⁷³ By this Jesus meant that Zaccheus' willingness to make restitution demonstrated true repentance and genuine salvation.

Therefore, everyone who receives God's forgiveness becomes a forgiver by nature so that he is always ready to forgive. Also, the one forgiven repents and accepts his responsibility to pay restitution wherever possible.

⁷² Luke 19:8.

⁷³ Luke 19:9.

Forgiveness Personally Given

We have already seen that one who receives biblical forgiveness by nature becomes a forgiver and, therefore, a channel for God's forgiveness to others. In this section, some important considerations are given regarding how this ministry of forgiveness is to be carried out.

First, we are to forgive as God forgives us. Since we receive His forgiveness only when we repent and are willing to pay restitution, we are to offer His forgiveness only to those who do the same. We must not add anything to or subtract anything from His forgiveness. It is full, complete release from the guilt of the sins committed. This is true whether the forgiven party has committed the offense against us or against someone else. To demonstrate this principle one needs only to look at Moses and the apostle Paul.

Moses demonstrated the correct attitude over and over as he led the rebellious sons of Israel from Egypt to Kedesh Barnea. Concerning the incident where Israel rebelled against God by having Aaron make for them a golden calf we read:

Then Moses returned to the LORD, and said, "Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. "But now, if You will, forgive their sin-- and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!"⁷⁴

Again in another context, Moses pleaded with God to forgive His people and to demonstrate this forgiveness to all the nations around them.

The LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst? "I will smite them with pestilence and dispossess them, and I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they."

⁷⁴ Exodus 32:31-32.

But Moses said to the LORD, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for by Your strength You brought up this people from their midst, and they will tell {it} to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that You, O LORD, are in the midst of this people, for You, O LORD, are seen eye to eye, while Your cloud stands over them; and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. "Now if You slay this people as one man, then the nations who have heard of Your fame will say, "Because the LORD could not bring this people into the land which He promised them by oath, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness.' "But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, "The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear {the guilty} visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth {generations.} ' "Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now."⁷⁵

A principle that is very clear from this passage is that forgiveness is not simply a nice idea and that we have a choice of granting or not granting it. We should see forgiveness as a ministry essential to and at the heart of all the doctrines we profess and teach. Like Moses, we should seek God's forgiveness for others and to eagerly pass on God's forgiveness to men. Paul demonstrated a similar attitude when he wrote:

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, {separated} from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the {temple} service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.⁷⁶

Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for {their} salvation.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Numbers 14:11-19.

⁷⁶ Romans 9:1-5.

⁷⁷ Romans 10:1.

Every member of the Body of Christ, the Church, today has been given the title and function of a priest. In that capacity, we should be seeking ways in which we can be channels of God's forgiveness to men. If we are to do this as God has forgiven us, it means that we will also seek to insure that this forgiveness is biblical and, therefore, based upon God's holy and righteous standards and is preceded by repentance and the just payment of restitution when possible on the part of those receiving it.

When is forgiveness not in order

Under this heading, the first thing to note is the circumstances that call for biblical forgiveness. Not every conflict involves sin. It may only involve a difference of opinion. Poorly managed conflict can lead to sin resulting in a need for forgiveness. However, to see forgiveness as a route to early peace, as we have already said, may actually be avoidance as a conflict management style. When this happens, the whole issues of forgiveness is confused and cheapened. A good conflict manager will make a careful distinction between situations where forgiveness is necessary and situations where it is not.

Along the same line, not every incident where there is personal loss involves sin. Even when sin has not been committed, there may be the need for just compensation as in the case of an auto accident. Over the years I have been involved in three major auto accidents in which I was not at fault. The first one, in 1981, was when a car approaching me in a heavy downpour spun out of control and hit me head-on. In 1986 a pickup ran into the back of me doing considerable damage to my car and my body. Then in 1994, a woman failed to stop at a red light and rammed my car broadside leaving it totaled and my body again broken.

Not once in any of these accidents did I think it necessary to seek out the other driver in order to offer forgiveness. The driver of the first accident was at fault because she did not observe due caution in a rainstorm. Her insurance carriers reimbursed me for the damage to my car and provided some payment for pain and suffering. The same was true in each of the remaining two accidents. In each of these a police officer issued citations to the drivers. They were not only responsible for bodily and property damage, they had also broken the law.

It is possible that I could have provided some emotional relief to these three drivers by going to them and granting forgiveness to them. However, the principles of biblical forgiveness did not play a part in any of these incidents because, to my knowledge, there was no sin involved. This is the same for any conflict management situation. The conciliator needs to make a distinction between an accident that merely causes bodily damage, property damage, and loss of income and one that is an act of sin against God. He will also need to make sure that the conflict does not escalate into acts of sin on the part of either party. If sin is involved, he needs to carefully manage the conflict so that justice prevails as well as that biblical forgiveness is sought and received.

Distinguishing Between Forgiveness and Emotion

It is important to clearly distinguish forgiveness from emotion. Forgiveness is not a feeling—it is an action. On the other hand, anger, frustration, bitterness, vengefulness, etc., are emotions. Not receiving forgiveness may result in these emotions and, in turn, these emotions may cause one to not want to grant forgiveness. In the same way, granting forgiveness or receiving it may make one feel good. It is very important to

distinguish between forgiveness and feeling because only when this distinction is understood will we be able to address the true issues in a conflict situation..

It is important to notice in the list of the deeds of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21, that strong negative emotions are mentioned but unforgiveness is not one of them. The same is true of the fruit of the Spirit in verses 22, 23. Forgiveness is not listed. Even in 1 Corinthians 13, unforgiveness and forgiveness are not listed as attributes of love. The decision to not forgive when forgiveness is appropriate may be the result of bitterness or the motivation to get even. Therefore, the conflict manager must attempt to sort out emotions from issues so that both can be addressed appropriately.

Of interest to the subject of forgiveness is the Greek adjective, *ἐπιεικής* (*epieikēs*), and the corresponding noun, *ἐπιεικεία* (*epieikeia*). Both have the connotation of sweet reasonableness. W. E. Vines gives the following definition for each:

epieikes ^1933^, from *epi*, "unto," and *eikos*, "likely," denotes "seemly, fitting"; hence, "equitable, fair, moderate, forbearing, not insisting on the letter of the law"; it expresses that considerateness that looks "humanely and reasonably at the facts of a case"; it is rendered "gentle" in <1 Tim. 3:3>, RV (KJV, "patient"), in contrast to contentiousness; in <Titus 3:2>, "gentle," in association with meekness, in <Jas. 3:17>, as a quality of the wisdom from above, in <1 Pet. 2:18>, in association with the good; for the RV rendering "forbearance" in <Phil. 4:5>, RV, see FORBEARANCE. Cf. B. See PATIENT.# In the Sept., <Esth. 8:13; Ps. 86:5>.#

epieikeia ^1932^, or *epieikia*, denotes "fairness, moderation, gentleness," "sweet reasonableness" (Matthew Arnold); it is said of Christ, <2 Cor. 10:1>, where it is coupled with *prautes*, "meekness"; for its meaning in <Acts 24:4>, see CLEMENCY.#. Trench (Syn. Sec. xlviii) considers that the ideas of equity and justice which are essential to the meaning, do not adequately express it in English. In contrast with *prautes*

("meekness"), which is more especially a temperament or habit of mind, epieikeia expresses an active dealing with others.⁷⁸

Any effective conflict manager will approach a conflict with an attitude of sweet reasonableness and will seek to encourage both sides of the conflict to demonstrate this same attitude. Through wisdom and understanding, the conflicting parties are brought together and, if forgiveness is in order, both parties are helped to understand what forgiveness is and how it applies to the conflict. Where negative emotions exist, these emotions should be sorted out from the issues in the conflict and addressed separately. Where offenses have been committed either against the opposing party and/or others, God's forgiveness should be explained. Repentance and restitution should be sought from those who are guilty of sin or who are responsible for the loss. Everything should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. An understanding of what biblical forgiveness is and how to achieve it in a conflict situation is very important for anyone who seeks to be a third-party mediator.

I am the director of a nonprofit organization called Episkopeo Ministries. This organization has been formed to offer encouragement and counsel to pastors, missionaries, and local churches. The name comes from Hebrews 12:15 where we are instructed to "See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled." The command "see to it" translates the Greek word, επισκοπεω (episkopeō). The explanation for this command in verses 16 and 17 is very important to the matter of conflict management.

⁷⁸ W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr. eds., Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 263.

The writer refers to Esau, the grandson of Abraham and first-born son of Isaac, the promised son of Abraham. If human social conventions had prevailed, Esau would have inherited the promised blessings. Instead, he despised his birthright and refused to obey God. At every turn he spurned his family's heritage and refused to repent. Even when confronted with his rebellion and the consequences of it, in an attitude of pure contempt for his parents, his family, God, and God's promises, he sought out wives from the world and proved his utter disdain for them all. Moses records:

So Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan displeased his father Isaac; and Esau went to Ishmael, and married, besides the wives that he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebaioth.⁷⁹

Concerning this act, we read the following commentary:

[When Esau saw ...]-- desirous to humour his parents, and if possible get the last will revoked, he became wise when too late (see <Matt. 25:10>), and hoped, by gratifying his parents in one thing, to atone for all his former delinquencies. But he only made bad worse; and though he did not marry a "wife of the daughters of Canaan," he married into a family which God had rejected; it showed a partial reformation, but no repentance, because he gave no proofs of abating his vindictive purposes against his brother, nor cherishing that pious spirit that would have gratified his father-- he was like Micah (see <Judg. 17:13>: see the note at <Gen. 36:2>).⁸⁰

If we were living at the time of Esau, this may have been mistaken for a simple family feud in need of some basic counsel on family living. However, from its Old Testament context and from the New Testament writer's application of this family conflict, we glean an important lesson in conflict management. Had *Sociological*,

⁷⁹ Genesis 28:8-9.

⁸⁰ BibleSoft's Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary, Electronic Database. Copyright © 1997 by BibleSoft. All rights reserved.

Psychological, Existential, or Indulgence Forgiveness been advocated in this situation, the results would probably have been the same—feeble attempts to paper over what was actually rebellion against God. The application to the Christian conflict manager is that only biblical forgiveness will fulfill the admonition to "see to it that no one comes short of the grace of God." Only through biblical forgiveness will the roots of bitterness be plucked up so as to prevent a harvest like the one that continues to be reaped today from that conflict so long ago.