THE PRACTICE OF FORGIVENESS IN THE LCA

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INTRODUCTION

There is some confusion and uncertainty about the nature and practice of forgiveness in our society and in the LCA. This matter has been brought out into the open with the debate on sexual abuse and the legal requirement for the mandatory reporting of abuse to minors. In addition to this, the exposure of sexual abuse in the church has aroused the suspicion that the practice of private confession and absolution may serve to excuse sexual abusers and cover up sexual abuse.

In response to a request from the LCA National Safe Place Committee the General Church Council of the LCA set up a taskforce in July 2007 to examine the issues involved. This taskforce was asked to do four things:

- To clarify the Lutheran understanding of the theology and practice of confession and absolution
- To investigate the present psychological understanding of the practice of forgiveness
- To make recommendations about the practice of confession and absolution for corporate and individual use
- To list the resources on the practice of forgiveness which are already available or need to developed for use in the LCA.

The completion of the work done by this taskforce coincided, quite providentially, with the official visit of Ted Kober to the LCA, in order to present seminar workshops on reconciliation for pastors and some lay people. On behalf of **Ambassadors for Reconciliation** he dealt with the resolution of conflicts within the church in a godly way, with a special emphasis of the practice of private confession and absolution.

In dealing with the issue of reconciliation the taskforce found that it needed to distinguish between human and divine forgiveness. They are, of course, related, but they are also different. Any human being may forgive another person. It does not matter whether they are Christians or not. But that does not mean that God thereby forgives that person. Yet, for His disciples, Jesus connects both kinds of forgiving quite closely. He teaches and practises both kinds of forgiveness. He, too, calls and empowers the church to do so. He calls those who have been forgiven by God the Father to forgive each other as His children.

What then is human forgiveness?

Its context is clear. It occurs when those who have been offended, those who have been wronged, forgive the person who has committed the offence. This can, of course, only be done by the person who has been offended. It cannot be demanded, or required, or coerced. It can only be offered freely on request and received as a gift. That is the prerogative of the offended person.

Forgiveness is usually offered only after the offender has admitted the offence, accepted blame for it, and apologised for it directly, in words or writing, to the person who has been wronged. While a person may forgive another without requiring and receiving any kind of reparation, forgiveness is most commonly given after the wrongdoer has, in some way, made up for the evil deed or has undertaken to do so.

What does the human act of forgiveness achieve? It does not just mean that those who have been wronged decide either to overlook or to forget the wrongs that have been done. It does not mean that they thereby excuse the wrong and stop blaming the wrongdoers for it. It does not necessarily mean that they feel well-disposed to the wrongdoers and approve of them. Rather, by forgiving their wrongdoers those who have been wronged give up their right to pay back their wrongdoers and to seek payback for the injustice that they have experienced. They decide to forego retribution and revenge. They decide that they will no longer either hold the offences of the offenders against them or reject them for the evil that they have done.

Forgiveness may precede reconciliation and resumption of friendship, but that does not always follow. In some relationships, such as marriage, forgiveness may lead to reconciliation and the restoration of acceptance and love. By itself forgiveness does not achieve reconciliation. Instead it clears away some of the obstacles to reconciliation.

Since the forgiveness of one person by another is a human act, it can be examined and analysed psychologically and sociologically. The study of sociology can show us how custom and convention govern what is required of those who apologise and how a wrongdoer is reinstated in any given society. The study of psychology is even more helpful in understanding the damage that is done emotionally by wrongdoing and in giving us some insights into the process of reconciliation from a human point of view. That is why a study of the psychological insights into guilt and remorse, regret and shame are quite legitimately included in this investigation. Yet it must not be forgotten that the academic discipline of psychology cannot analyse and describe how, when, where, and why God forgives those who have sinned against Him.

What is God's forgiveness and how does it differ from human forgiveness?

That will be explained in greater detail later in this report. But it is necessary to make some preliminary remarks to clarify what is under consideration.

First, God forgives the evil that has been done against Him and His creation. That is what is meant by the term 'sin.' People sin against God by breaking His law as it is summarised in the Ten Commandments. This happens in a number of different ways. People sin against God directly by desecrating His holiness with offences against the first three commandments. They also sin against God indirectly by wronging other human beings whom He has created in his image and are under His protection, as well as by wronging His holy people whom He has reclaimed for Himself and made holy. So by breaking the last seven commandments they too sin against God. By breaking God's law every person who has ever lived on earth is accountable to Him (Rom 3:19). Before Him we are all sinners (Rom 3:23).

Second, God is not just the creator of humanity and the lawgiver for it; He is also the judge of humanity who cannot, and will not, tolerate injustice. He sticks up for those who have been abused and promises to vindicate them. He is the one who accuses sinners, judges them, finds them guilty of rebellion against Him, and passes his sentence on them. And that sentence is death (Rom 6:23)! But that is not the end of the matter. Through Jesus who sacrificed Himself to make up for the sins of humanity, God the Father exercises His prerogative of grace and offers pardon to those who repent and seek His forgiveness. By doing this He no longer holds their sin against them; He no longer condemns them for their sin but justifies them. Unlike

us humans, He, in fact, no longer even remembers our sin but removes it, so that it no longer mars His association with us (Ps 103:8-14; Jer 31:34; Heb 8:12; 9:28).[1]

Third, even though Jesus has died to make up for the sins of the whole world, this does not mean, as some claim, that all are thereby forgiven. What Jesus has won for humanity He now offers to every sinner in this age of grace, no matter how grave the offence from a human point of view. He speaks the Father's word of pardon to believers through His ministers in the church.[2] His ministers speak that word of pardon, the word of God the Judge, the divine absolution, to those who confess their sins against God, trust in His word, and seek His pardon. Unlike human acts of forgiveness, that pardon does not depend on what sinners have done to make up for their sins; it depends on Christ's sacrifice and His intercession for them. What's more, by their reception of God's pardon they are reconciled to God the Father who approves of them and loves them. He is as pleased with them as He is with Jesus. Since they receive His forgiveness, the threat of His condemnation and rejection of them has been removed. Since they enjoy God's forgiveness, they can now, in turn, forgive those who wrong them. In this way God's forgiveness is passed on to others here on earth.

[1] He does not thereby necessarily undo the physical and social effects of our wrongdoing even though He can, of course, choose to do so. They may remain. Nor does He excuse us from seeking reconciliation with those whom we have wronged, making up with them, and righting what has gone wrong.

[2] This is unique to the Christian faith. While Jews and Muslims also agree that only God can forgive sins, they teach that humans have to wait for Judgment Day to receive His forgiveness. Meanwhile they must obey God's law, confess their sins, and hope in God's mercy for them in the Last Judgment. In contrast to that teaching, Jesus now offers God's pardon to those who admit their sins and trust in His word of forgiveness. He has, in fact, authorised the human ministers of the gospel to speak that word of absolution in the church, the word by which He actually forgives those who repent and seek forgiveness. No rabbi can do that. Nor can any Muslim imam. Only Christ can pronounce that absolution through those whom He has appointed His ministers.

THE RELEVANCE OF FORGIVENESS

How does the need for interpersonal forgiveness and reconciliation commonly arise?

Even though we have a rite for public confession and absolution in every Lutheran service, people all too rarely approach a pastor or another Christian to make private confession of sin and guilt. In fact, many Lutherans seem to be unaware that they may do so. If they are aware of this possibility they do not seem to appreciate the great value of receiving an absolution for particular offenses personally from a pastor. This may be because pastors and Christian counselors seldom offer it in pastoral care. Those who provide pastoral care within the church therefore need to realise that the problem which lies at the heart of many casual or pastoral conversations is the unrecognized relevance of forgiveness to the situation. If they are to work with Christ there, they need to see and affirm how he brings both accusation and comfort, recognition of wrongdoing and release through forgiveness and reconciliation.

In many cases, this need for forgiveness and reconciliation is immediately apparent, or at least relatively easily identified. Although the complexity of human relationships makes it impossible to compile a comprehensive list of situations where healing through forgiveness may be asked for or offered, the following are examples of occasions where we may recognise the need for forgiveness in the human experience of deep hurt and brokenness.

The stress from marital breakdown

- Divorce
- Remarriage
- Retirement
- Sickness
- Death of a child
- Lack of love
- Sexual infidelity
- Physical, verbal abuse
- Abortion
- Problems with gambling, alcohol, and drug use
- Passive-aggressive behaviour

The stress from family troubles

- Divorce
- Remarriage
- Physical, verbal abuse
- Neglect of children
- Unrealistic parental expectations
- Loss of parental dreams
- Victimisation of children
- Favouritism
- Death of a family member
- Disputes over legacies and family property
- Children leaving the church and giving up the Christian faith
- Estrangement
- Lack of love

- Addiction to gambling, alcohol and drugs
- Sickness
- Same-sex relationships

Broken relationships
- Injustice
- Careless or deliberate abuse of property
- Greed
- Gossip and the breach of confidentiality
- Careless or deliberate verbal abuse
- Neglect
- Judgementalism
- Being overlooked or victimised
- Physical abuse, violence
- Inaction
- Gambling, alcoholism, drug abuse
- Racism, sexism
- Abuse of power

Crises at stages of life
- Children leaving home
- Mid-life disorientation
- Employer/employee relationship breakdown
- Loss of job or retirement

Ageing
- Dealing with past regrets
- Alienation and loneliness
- Neglect
- Abuse, verbal or physical
- Separation from family and friends
- Estrangement from family
- Bereavement
- Dying

Church
- Abuse by clergy, whether physical, emotional, verbal
- Disappointment by parishioners or clergy
- Factionalism
- Unrealistic and contradictory expectations
- Death of dreams
- Gossip and breach of confidentiality
- Neglect of worship and dissatisfaction with its practice
- Neglect of duty
- Past hurts and intergenerational feuds
- Loss of faith and unbelief
- Public sin and its censorship
- Theological disagreement

However, there are many times when the relevance of forgiveness to a situation is not so clear. Such occasions are likely to present themselves under the guise of complex issues or emotions, both for those who need to forgive and those who seek forgiveness.

Here are some scenarios which may help us to be more sensitive to situations where forgiveness is likely to be an underlying issue.

Presenting Issues

Grief
The experience of grief can sometimes be affected by a sense of regret and guilt. For example, when there has been a difference between two people and one dies, the other may express regret for past actions done or left undone. They may think: 'I wish I had not said this or done such and such to him/her' or: 'If only I had done this or that.'

> *Bill and Marie, who both led very busy working lives, were having a difficult time with their son Jason who was still living at home with them. He had left school and taken up a job about a year earlier and had been able to buy himself a car. But the relationship with his parents was not good. He was seldom at home and spent most of his free time with his mates who often got him into heavy drinking and fast driving. Around the home he was lazy and untidy. There were frequent arguments between Jason and his parents. After one particularly volatile argument Jason stormed out of the house and drove off in his car. Later that evening he was killed in a road accident. Now Bill and Marie's grief is exacerbated by such thoughts as: 'If only we had spent more time with Jason. If only we hadn't been so hard on him. If only we had been more forgiving.'*

> *Jill is mourning the sudden death of her husband Dean who was killed while racing his motorcycle. Dean loved motor cycle racing and devoted all his spare time to it. Although they enjoyed a good marriage, Jill cannot forgive Dean for taking part in such a dangerous sport. Her grief is compounded by feelings of anger. She is angry with Dean for throwing away his life and their life together.*

Such feelings can manifest themselves also in instances of separation and divorce. The normal feelings of grief can be compounded by feelings of regret and sometimes anger.

> *Jim is grieving for his wife Barbara who left him for another man. He is plagued by regret and thinks: 'If only I had shown more love to her she would not have left me.'*

Depression
There are times when depression can be caused and compounded by feelings of guilt. A person can become depressed because of unresolved guilt. It may manifest itself in such statements as: 'I am so sinful, can God really forgive me?' or: 'What I did was so bad, no one could forgive me,' or: 'I don't deserve to be forgiven.'

> *Samantha developed an addiction to gambling through playing poker machines. At first she only used spare cash, but soon she dipped into the housekeeping money. Then it got to the point where she didn't have enough money to buy sufficient good food for the children. She hated herself for what she was doing to herself and to her family. But what could she do? She was too ashamed to admit what she was doing to her friends, and even her*

husband. She felt compelled to go back to the pokies again and again, driven by the feeling that next time she would at last have a big win.

Worry

While all wrongdoing should be acknowledged and confessed in order to receive forgiveness, it is quite another matter to worry about past wrongs and fret whether forgiveness is full and complete. Worry about a wrong committed can negate any forgiveness that is offered and sabotage the process of reconciliation.

Phil and Betty had been faithful to each other and happily married for nearly thirty years. After a younger woman at Phil's workplace became attracted to him, they began spending more and more time together out of work hours until this eventually led to a sexual encounter. Phil then felt deep remorse for what he had done and broke off the relationship. He confessed to Betty who, after much discussion, decided to forgive him. But Phil is still haunted by what he did. He is worried that Betty may not have fully forgiven him.

Colin is highly respected in his community as a man of honour and true to his word. He was taken to court by a vindictive neighbour over a fencing dispute. Although the court dismissed the charge against him, and although Colin has repeatedly sought reconciliation with his neighbour, the neighbour refuses any reconciliation. Colin is worried by this and worried too by the effect that the dispute is having on his good reputation.

Demand for recognition or vindication

Such demands can arise when people are not given due recognition for their position in society or in a family or organisation, or for a task completed, or a role carried out. Where justice has not been done and due recognition has not been given, a desire for vindication or revenge can arise in those who have been slighted.

Bill was the treasurer of his small congregation for 20 years. The job took up many hours in his busy schedule of work, but he enjoyed the work and considered that he had done a good job. The auditors always found his bookkeeping to be accurate and the congregation members were happy about the tidy way in which the finances were kept. But when he retired nobody thanked him for his many years of service. He was at first disappointed, then hurt, and finally angry at his fellow congregational members for not recognising his efforts and his talents. He now refuses to attend meetings and is critical of his replacement.

Jean is an elderly mother who is angry and upset at her adult children. They seldom come to visit her, especially since her husband died. When the children were small, life was tough financially. Jean had to go out to work to supplement her husband's income, so that the children could be clothed, fed, and educated. She feels it that her income enabled them all to get a good start in life. Now when they are well established with comfortable homes and good employment, they appear too busy and too engrossed in their own affairs to care about her.

Fred was badly injured at his work place. Although an investigation by a tribunal found no fault with the employer, Fred is of the opinion that his employer was at fault. In his view he had been asked to operate a piece of

unsafe equipment. But his employer refuses to accept responsibility. Fred is demanding compensation from his employer.

Presenting emotions

Anger

When anger it is directed at another person it can be harmful unless it is managed well, and destructive unless it is handled carefully. Anger is often accompanied by the desire that the other person should be disadvantaged, or harmed, or punished in some way. Anger that is not resolved through forgiveness and reconciliation can easily lead to bitterness, resentment, and hatred. Yet anger is also good, because it can be an indication that something has gone wrong in a primary relationship.

In some cases anger is clear; in other cases it is not.

Kathy runs a delicatessen business and has several employees. Kathy had reason to speak to one of her employees, Jan, about her poor work performance. Jan is often late for work, and is slow in serving customers, and doesn't clean up thoroughly at the end of the day. When Kathy spoke to Jan about this Jan became very angry. She now bad mouths Kathy to the customers and has even begun to help herself to items from the shelves as a way of getting back at Kathy.

Sometimes anger can be used deliberately to hurt another person.

Jack and Cheryl are a married couple who often have heated arguments. Sometimes they don't speak to each other for days. At times they deliberately do things that will annoy the other person. They have even been known to belittle one another in public.

Anger can also be directed at another person not involved in a dispute.

Terry had a bad day at work. One thing after another went wrong. He was angry at the way he was treated by the boss. When he arrived home he yelled at his wife for not having a meal prepared to his satisfaction.

Guilt

A person often feels guilt when they have committed a wrong against someone. Such wrongdoing may be deliberate or intentional, but it may also be committed unwittingly or unintentionally.

Simon caused injury to another person through his inattentive driving.

Gloria is a mother of an adventurous toddler. She inadvertently left the front gate open and her child escaped out into the street, only to be hit by a passing car.

Sometimes a wrong can be done in the heat of the moment or in a sudden angry outburst.

Susannah parents a young family. One day, out of frustration and anger, she hit out and injured one of her children. She feels bad about this and now regrets this outburst.

Guilt often follows actions that people later come to regret.

Bill and Joan work closely side by side each day at work. Both are married, but they find themselves becoming attracted to each other. Eventually there

is a sexual encounter, but neither of them wants it to destroy their existing marriage. They feel guilty about what took place.

Some feel guilty about a liking for or an addiction to pornography, or for some other sexual aberration in their lives.

Shame

Shame can accompany guilt and can sometimes be confused with guilt when a wrong has been committed. Even after a person has been forgiven there may still be a lingering sense of shame and embarrassment at what has happened.

Martin went through a rebellious period when he was a teenager. Much against his parents' wishes he drank and smoked heavily, partied hard, and sometimes stayed out all night, causing his parents much grief. On one occasion the police had to be called in to settle a drunken brawl he was involved in. Martin has since been reconciled with his parents. He has apologised for his behaviour and they have assured him of their forgiveness and love. But now years later Martin still feels ashamed of what he did.

Victims of sexual abuse often feel a deep sense of shame. They can feel sullied and dirty, or somehow responsible for the abuse that took place.

Family shame can last for years and sometimes even generations.

Sue grew up in a well to do family that regarded education and social status as being very important. She married a man who had left school early and was an unskilled worker. Her parents did not approve of the marriage. She should have married someone better, they said, and frequently told her so. Although she loves her husband and is deeply committed to him, yet years later she still feels a sense of shame at having let down her parents.

When people present themselves with these issues and exhibit these emotions, they themselves are often quite unaware of the deep underlying psychological and spiritual dimensions of their problems. But any Christian counselor who is involved in their pastoral care will need to help them to recognise these realities, so that they can receive the help that they need. In the following section we will examine how the findings of psychologists can help us in making sense of how people who have done wrong or been wronged think and feel and act about what they have done and what has happened to them. That will be followed by a discussion on the role of confession and absolution in offering God's help to people in need of forgiveness and reconciliation.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF PSYCHOLOGY TO UNDERSTANDING THE PRACTICE OF REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

Repentance and Forgiveness: an Introduction for Counsellors

Repentance and forgiveness are experienced by all of us as we live out our lives in the physical, social and personal dimensions of our earthly existence. We experience repentance and forgiveness in our minds and bodies. We also experience and act out repentance and forgiveness in our relationships with others. It is therefore possible to examine the horizontal aspects of repentance and forgiveness by discussing the *psychological* experience of repentance and forgiveness. The following sections discuss psychological theory and research concerned with these topics in order to show the ways in which repentance and forgiveness are experienced psychologically by human beings.

We begin by looking at psychological manifestations of repentance. Because repentance is primarily a religious concept, there is no well-formed psychological view of repentance. We can come closest to discussing the psychological manifestations of repentance by considering remorse and its related emotions. We go on to examine the emotion of anger, which is often a starting point for discussing forgiveness. We then discuss psychological models of forgiveness, before finishing with a discussion of reconciliation and restoration.

People Who Seek Help or Forgiveness after Wrongdoing

Remorse and its Relatives

By remorse we mean a form of regret for wrongdoing which is 'deep [and] bitter.'[3] The term 'remorse' comes from Old French *remors* and from the Latin verb for 'biting,' *mordere*, with the prefix *re-* for repetition. Remorse can be described as repeatedly metaphorically biting oneself emotionally. One way of describing this experience is by saying that 'a morsel of the past has resurfaced and must be bitten again.'[4] Thus remorse is a painful and intense emotion. It is closely connected with regret and guilt. Psychological research shows that remorse is also closely related to a sense of shame. So remorse is compared and contrasted with its relatives - shame, regret, and guilt.

This analysis of remorse and its related emotions depends on four propositions. First, three aspects of the emotions need to be considered: feelings, thinking, and characteristic behaviour. Second, it is assumed that while people want pleasant feelings to increase or last longer, they want unpleasant feelings to decrease or to last for a shorter time. Because remorse, regret, guilt, and shame all involve unpleasant feelings, people are

[3] Hornby 1980, 713.
[4] Gorelick 1989; Hoad 1993; (Studzinski 1989, 210).

motivated to decrease them. Third, unpleasant feelings associated with remorse, regret, guilt, and shame are decreased by acting in characteristic ways. Fourth, the characteristic ways in which we behave when we feel regret, shame, guilt, or remorse depend on the type of thoughts we commonly experience when we feel these emotions. These thoughts are about the impact of a bad event on us emotionally and its negative consequences for us and others.

The four emotions of remorse, regret, shame, and guilt are shown in Table 1 below according to the type of event that triggered the emotion with its characteristic types of thinking and behaviour. We can distinguish regret, shame, guilt, and remorse by their event characteristics, by what affect us and how it impacts on us. We can only have remorse about our own actions. We, however, do not just feel guilty, regretful, or ashamed for our own actions. Since guilt concerns our personal responsibility, we do not just feel guilty about what we do but also about what we fail to do ─ our deeds of omission. Regret goes even further than that, since it may also include what others do to us or fail to do for us. Indeed, our failure to act can provoke particularly painful regret. Our own actions or failure to act may also lead to shame. So too do the actions or omissions of others, if they reflect badly on our own standing or worth, such as illegal actions by our children. Shame therefore has to do with the effect of what is done, or not done, on our sense of worth and our status in our community.

The four emotions can, to some extent, be distinguished by what we think and how we behave or wish to behave. Shame can be most clearly distinguished from the other three emotions. The focus in **shame** is on thinking about one's self: how I believe others see me and how I see myself as a defective person or as someone who has failed as a person. In shame the distinctive thoughts about our defective self lead to the distinctive behaviour of a shamed person: wanting to disappear, withdrawing from others, blushing, and averting our gaze. Shame may also be characterised by two features common to other emotions: apologising or wanting to apologise, and wanting to be forgiven. In shame, both apologising for our misdeeds and desiring forgiveness for what we have done may be reactions to rejection by others.

In the case of **guilt**, our thinking is oriented both to ourselves and to others. I may think about consequences for others of what I have done or have failed to do. In doing so I am motivated by guilt rather than compassion, because my concern for the consequences of my mistreatment of others is connected with a concern for my personal standards in my duty to them. I feel guilt because I have violated my personal standards for my behaviour with others. My personal standards may not necessarily involve conduct towards others; I could also have a duty of care for myself and my own body. In either case, the violation of personal standards results in me passing judgment on myself with the acknowledgment that I deserve to be punished and that I am obliged to live up to my standards in future. So guilt is often associated with a decision to behave differently in future and, more generally, with a resolve to live up to personal standards. In guilt our orientation towards others is shown by our desire to confess and to be forgiven.

The characteristic thinking of **regret** is similar to **remorse**, since remorse is a form of regret. In both we think repeatedly about the consequences of what has happened for ourselves and for others. Remorse and regret differ in degree in these areas. Regret emphasises consequences for ourselves of our own actions as well as of our missed opportunities and failures to act. But with remorse we turn the focus of our thinking away from ourselves, and onto the consequences of our own actions for others. In fact, the common characteristic of remorse is persistent reflection on how our whole life has been damaged by what we have done or by what has happened to us. In some ways, remorse is deep emotion that does not just react to what has happened, but it also concerns who

we are. This aspect of remorse has been reported in psychological literature.[5] Since remorse is more focussed on morality and on others than is regret, it shares with guilt the characteristics of confession, punishment, and forgiveness. In contrast with regret, remorse brings with it a greater desire for apology, reparation, and change in future behaviour.

Although the four emotions of regret, remorse, shame, and guilt can be distinguished, it is common that we may have two or more of these emotions within the same experience. Suppose that a married man has had an extramarital affair with another woman. His wife then learns of the affair and leaves her husband. As a result, he experiences considerable distress. If he focused his thoughts on the loss of his wife because his affair, he would, most likely, experience remorse or regret. His distress might be chiefly focussed on what he did not do, such as his failure to tell his wife about the affair before she found it out for herself, or even his failure to take up another job offered some time earlier which would not have brought him into contact with his lover. He would therefore experience a sense of regret. But if the man's distress were focussed on the affair itself, he would, quite likely, wish that he had never met the woman with whom he had the affair and formed a sexual relationship with her that caused such harm to his marriage. This constellation of thoughts stems from remorse, as it concerns his actions. In his distress, he might apologise to his wife and make reparation by terminating the relationship with the other woman. If his wife returned to him and resumed their marital relationship, his distress would decrease and perhaps even disappear. However, he would find that his relationship with his wife had changed as a result of his behaviour. If his wife did not return, he might continue to reflect on what he had done and wish that he could change the past, even though he knew that this could never happen. In that case, he would continue to be in a state of painful remorse.

The other two emotions of shame and guilt concern the way in which we evaluate ourselves. If the man who had committed adultery belonged to a society or culture that officially prohibited extramarital affairs, it would affect his perception of his standing in the eyes of others with the prospect of condemnation by them. Since he expected them to condemn him, he would, most likely, assume that it had happened, pass judgment on himself for what he had done, and act as if they had condemned him. He might avoid places where he could meet acquaintances, keep his eyes downcast when he mixed with others, and try to keep to himself as much as he could. This loss of face, this fear of public scrutiny, is shame.

It is also possible that the man would question his actions, his moral standards, and what his actions said about him. From his reassessment of himself as a husband he could avoid shame by apologising to his wife and promising to do what he could to repair their relationship. This type of reparation is characteristic of both remorse and guilt. If he were to keep watch over his own behaviour over a long period of time in order to check that he was living up to his personal standards, he would have the experience of ongoing guilt from his infidelity to his wife.

This example shows that shame in itself is not at all helpful in promoting personal change. But remorse could lead this man to focus on his actions and their consequences, leading to reparation and change in behaviour. The addition of a sense of guilt, with the resulting judgment of behaviour against personal standards, could lead to a change in his lifestyle.

[5] Davitz, 1969; Shafranske, 1989.

Table 1: Characteristics of Shame, Guilt, Regret, and Remorse

Characteristic	Shame	Guilt	Regret	Remorse
Event				
Personal Action ('I did the action')	+	+	+	+
Action by Others ('Others did it')	+		+	
Personal Omission ('I failed to act')	+	+	++	
Others' Omission ('Others failed to act')	+		+	
Recurrent Thoughts				
Personal Material Consequences ('It has cost me money, lifestyle, opportunities')			++	+
Material Consequences for Others ('It has cost those I hurt or my family money, lifestyle, opportunities ')		++	+	++
Altered existence ('My life has changed; I have been changed by what I did')				+
Judgment by Others ('Other people look down on me')	++		+	+
Negative view of self ('I am a bad person; I am a failure; I am unworthy')	++			
Personal standards ('I did wrong; I deserve to be punished')		++		+
Social standards ('I broke social rules')	+			
Behaviour (actual or wished for)				
Different situation ('I want things to be different than they are')	+	+		
Personal Undoing (' I wish I had not done it; I wish I could undo what I did')	+	+		
Wanting to Disappear ('I wish I could disappear')	++			
Withdrawal ('Keep away from others; isolate myself')	+			
Averting Gaze ('I look away from others')	+			

Blushing	+			
Confession ('I want to confess what I did')		+		
Change of Behaviour ('I want to behave differently in future')		+		
Personal Standards ('I want to live up to my standards')		+		
Correction ('I want to fix up what is wrong')		+		
Apology ('I apologised; I wanted to apologise')	+	+		
Punishment ('I want to be punished')		+		
Reparation ('I want to make things better for others')		++		
Forgiveness ('I want to be forgiven')	+	+		

A further implication of the model of the four emotions presented here is that our experience of shame in such situations is likely to be least helpful for others or for ourselves. When we are ashamed of ourselves, we do not think about how to change the way we behave, nor do we consider whether we have behaved morally, but we try to reduce our painful self-consciousness by hiding from others.

The Implications of Remorse and Shame

Shame is manifested in a personal encounter by the averted gaze of the eyes, the submissive posture of the body, and a reluctance to discuss issues of importance. Shame is best healed by pastoral relationship in which the counsellor avoids those kinds of interactions that aggravate the sense of shame, demonstrates acceptance of the shamed person, openly identifies the shame, and acknowledges that those who feel ashamed of themselves are usually reluctant to disclose any information that invites negative judgment and so increases their sense of shame. Those who deal with people that have been shamed need to adopt an approach that reduces shame by showing warmth and appreciation, by respecting them and their embarrassment, by identifying the offence and judging it without passing judgment on the offenders, and explicitly seeking to have the offenders attend to their worthwhile qualities.[6] By accepting them and their shame they help them to gain an accurate, balanced sense of their own worth.

Since the urge to make restitution is a pressing concern for remorseful individuals, the possibility of making appropriate restitution should be discussed with them; they should be encouraged to turn their confessions into action plans on how to make up for what they

[6] Proeve & Howells 2002; 2006.

have done.[7] The remorseful person can engage in a process of developing a plan of restitution, which might have short-term, middle-term, and long-term steps. Depending on the wishes of victims or others affected by the offence, it may be appropriate to offer an apology. If it is not possible to make direct reparation to those who have been harmed, symbolic reparation can be offered, such as by monetary contribution to a charitable cause or doing some work for a charity.

People Who Have Been Wronged

People who have been wronged by others may feel strong emotions of various kinds. They may feel ashamed or humiliated as a result of what was done to them. Their reactions may be similar to the description of shame listed above. They may have daydreams about gaining revenge on the person who wronged them. As a result of the desire for revenge, they may feel guilty, as described above. This is because revenge does not fit their personal moral standards.

To be wronged by another person, especially somebody in a close relationship, is a betrayal of the trust placed in that person. Such betrayal requires some restoration of trust in order to maintain a functioning relationship. Restoration of trust may require a considerable amount of time and effort on the part of the offender and on the part of the wronged person. A common experience of people who have been wronged is the experience of anger. In addition, recognition of anger may be the starting point for a person to engage with the process of forgiveness. For these reasons, anger is described here.

Anger

We all experience anger. Anger is characterised by increased physical arousal, thoughts that we have been unjustly treated, and easily recognised facial expressions. We commonly experience anger in response to being wronged or harmed by others. Because anger arouses us physically and emotionally, it can have the valuable effect of motivating us to address injustices to ourselves or to others. However, anger can also have bad consequences for our relationships with others: a person who is angry may strike out at others, or at least feel like doing so without acting on it if constrained by a situation.[8]

When we feel angry we also think about the injustice of what has been done to us. Because injustice is always, to some extent, subjective, some people often consider that they have been unjustly treated, even when people around them may not agree. Such people may experience anger very frequently or very intensely. They may develop poor relationships with those around them; or, more seriously, they may even act violently towards other people. People with excessive anger can be helped to manage their anger. This usually involves both learning to lower their physical tension and learning to question their own beliefs about how other people wronged them.

Some people have the opposite tendency. To others, they never seem to become angry, even when they are treated unjustly. It is generally the case that they do experience anger but they suppress their expression of it. Although this approach may seem to promote harmonious relationships, there can be harmful consequences. First, people who suppress anger suffer because they allow others to treat them unjustly. Secondly, their suppression of anger may not work all the time.

[7] Potter-Efron 2002.
[8] Davitz 1963; Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor 1987).

They may strike out at others who have done little to offend them, because they have reached breaking point. There are cases of people who have committed isolated acts of extreme violence, but are known by other people to be generally meek and accommodating. People who habitually suppress anger can learn to make their wishes known to other people without doing so aggressively. Such assertive ways of communicating with others can be liberating for people who tend to suppress anger and for the people with whom they have relationships.

More recently, psychologists have advocated forgiveness of others as a useful way of learning to take others' perspective in people with anger problems.[9] In this respect, psychological literature concerned with anger management converges with the developing psychological literature concerning forgiveness.

Psychological Models of Forgiveness

The study of interpersonal forgiveness has developed as a topic of considerable interest for psychologists in the last ten years or so. Although many of the major contributors have a Christian background and perspective, this is not necessarily the case. Forgiveness of our sins by God is naturally not a topic to which psychology can properly contribute; however, the experience of forgiveness and the processes by which people forgive others are topics within the realm of psychology.

Strategies for psychological intervention to promote forgiveness of those who feel that they have been wronged have been developed from detailed conceptual models of the process of forgiveness. A number of well-conducted experimental studies with groups such as adolescents from broken homes, men whose children have been aborted, and survivors of incest, have shown that process-based interventions for forgiveness of others do result in a substantial increase in forgiveness and in improvements in emotional health, such as in relief from anxiety and depression.[10]

One of the major research groups concerned with forgiveness is led by Robert Enright. He and his colleagues understand forgiveness as an ongoing process that often starts at the point where a person experiences intense anger at another person or other people, based on real injustice or harm.[11] They, however, regard forgiveness as a helpful process for reducing anger and improving emotional health, rather than for healing relationships that have been damaged by sin and injustice.

The Enright group has proposed a phase model of forgiveness, which is shown here below in the second table.

Table 2 Phases of Forgiving in the Enright Model

Uncovering Phase
1. Looking at defences against anger
2. Releasing anger
3. Admitting shame if appropriate
4. Awareness of depleted energy
5. Awareness of ruminating about the unjust event
6. Awareness of comparing oneself with the injurer
7. Realising that one may be adversely changed by the injury

[9] Day, Gerace, Wilson, & Howells, 2008; Day, Howells, Mohr, Schall, & Gerace 2008).
[10] Baskin & Enright 2004.
[11] Enright & Fitzgibbons 2000.

8. Awareness of changed view about a 'just world'

Decision Phase

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

Work Phase

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

Deepening Phase

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

The first phase is concerned with uncovering effects of the injustice on a person's life. The second phase is concerned with thinking about what forgiveness is and is not, and with making a decision to forgive. For example, forgiveness is distinguished from pardoning, forgetting, cloaking revenge, and seeking reconciliation. The third phase is concerned with helping the client to understand that the person who committed the offence is more than the offence, which may result in the experience of some compassion toward the offender. In the fourth phase, the experience of being forgiven by others may be considered, and new ways to interact with the offender and with others are explored.

This phase model should not be used in the same way for every person. The model is not meant to prescribe a process that must be followed through in a rigid manner. There may be wide differences in the amount of time that people spend in each of the twenty units, in the order of the parts, and in the amount of difficulty people have in working through each part. Those who provide this model do not predict how long it will take a person to forgive. This varies from case to case as well as from person to person. Some, in fact, may never reach that point.

It is important to be clear about the nature of the Enright approach to forgiveness. The starting point is the experience of continuing anger, which is based on real injustice. The path to forgiveness is undertaken for the benefit of the wronged person rather than the benefit of the wrongdoer. It is meant to heal such emotional problems as consuming anger, anxiety, and depression. Forgiveness is therefore undertaken unilaterally, without necessarily involving the person responsible for the harm and injustice. The wronged person does not require repentance from the offender in order to forgive. Forgiveness is viewed quite apart from reconciliation. Reconciliation may occur with the offender at some point, but that is not the aim of this type of 'forgiveness therapy.' In addition, forgiveness is seen as a process with a number of steps. It may take a considerable amount of time to complete the process of forgiveness, and the time taken depends on the person who is going through the process of forgiveness.

Cautions about the Psychological Approach to Forgiveness

Psychological approaches to forgiveness, and specifically the Enright model, have been questioned on a number of grounds.[12] First, it may not be clear that forgiveness is the most appropriate approach at a particular time. So, for example, a woman who has been physically assaulted by a stranger may be troubled by recurring images of the assault. She may feel frequently anxious and may avoid the place where she was assaulted. In this case, psychological approaches to managing trauma responses would seem to be most appropriate at this stage of her treatment. She may wish to look at forgiveness in the future.

Second, the forgiveness model distinguishes between understanding an offender's behaviour and excusing it. However, some critics say that since it is difficult to make such a distinction, people who have been victims of injustice may feel pressure to excuse the harm inflicted on them. This point alerts us to the need to be clear with people who suffer injustice that understanding why somebody hurt them does not exonerate them from their responsibility for what they have done.

Third, it is possible that a person who forgives may accept an unjust situation which will continue to harm them. This point raises the difficult issue of advocacy. Who should decide that a person should not continue to stay in an unjust situation? When should a person be advised strongly to leave a relationship or other setting?

Fourth, the Enright model of forgiveness has been described as implicitly Christian. Critics suggest that the Christian view of forgiveness that underpins the approach should be made explicit. Furthermore, they ask whether this approach is appropriate for people without a Christian faith or background. For example, the Jewish view of forgiveness requires that repentance is required before forgiveness may be offered.

Fifth, a person who has suffered injustice may feel pressured to forgive someone who harmed them and resume their previous relationship with an offender who either denies the injustice or has not made an appropriate apology accompanied by some evidence of repentance. This situation may lead to further experience of victimisation. This particular objection to forgiveness may be addressed, to a degree, by distinguishing between forgiveness and reconciliation, as discussed in the next section. However, it is important to note that, while forgiveness of others is necessary for Christians, pressure from others to offer forgiveness quickly is not helpful and may even be harmful.

It is important to consider these objections to the psychological approach of forgiveness. They point to the importance of sensitivity in considering the present needs and situation of the person who has been wronged. Yet, if some one does embark on the journey of forgiveness, the Enright approach may offer a useful 'map' for the journey.

Reconciliation

Forgiveness can be a free choice on the part of the wronged person, which can be unconditional regardless of what the offender does. However, reconciliation always involves at least two people entering into a mutual relationship with each other. Reconciliation is dependent upon the offender's willingness and ability to change his

[12] Murphy & Lamb 2002.

or her ways. Importantly, forgiveness is often necessary for genuine reconciliation to occur.[13]

There are two important implications of this distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. First, forgiveness may take place without reconciliation between people. Secondly, it is likely that true reconciliation will not occur without forgiveness. Given that forgiveness may require a considerable amount of time, then reconciliation may require an even longer period of time. In addition, people may interact with those who have wronged them without forgiving them. Such a relationship may be described as cordial, but it is unlikely to be a trusting relationship or a reconciled relationship.

For reconciliation to occur, two things are required, namely forgiveness by the injured person and evidence of change by the offender. Evidence of change is usually given by the payment of reparation to the injured person in the form of goods or services. However, an apology is also a common and important form of reparation. Forgiveness can occur without apology, but an apology often helps a person to move along the path of forgiveness. However, an offender usually needs to make an apology before reconciliation occurs.

In an apology one party acknowledges responsibility for an offence and expresses regret or remorse to another party, which is aggrieved. Each party may consist of a single person or a larger group of people. Apologies can be private or public. Because apologising is an acknowledgement of a mistake which is accompanied by an expression of remorse, it is an act of humility. A sincere apology from a position of humility has considerable power to promote healing and reconciliation. However, any person who shows no humility and acts in an egocentric way in making an apology turns it into an insult that prevents any healing from the restoration of the relationship.[14]

Apologies may fail in various ways. For example, a person who apologises may fail to take responsibility by saying: “I regret any injuries caused, but I believed I was acting in everybody’s best interests at the time.” An egocentric apology may take the form “I am sorry that you are upset with me” or “I am sorry if I upset you” rather than “I am sorry that I hurt you.”

Since apologies can fail to achieve reconciliation, it is important to include the integral parts of a valid apology.[15] First, it is important to acknowledge that a moral rule or a relationship was violated and to take responsibility for it. The one making the apology must name the offence quite specifically and show that they understand how the relationship was violated, by saying something like: “I hurt you by putting you down in public.” That person should also show that the nature of the wrongdoing and its impact on the person is understood, by saying something like: “I am so sorry that I hurt you by what I said about you.”

Second, the person concerned may need to explain why the offence was committed, without trying to exonerate themselves and disowning responsibility for what has been done. They may also need to show that it does not represent what they will be like and how they intend to behave in the future. So, for example, the one apologising might say that they were drunk, and promise never to do anything like this again.

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[13] Freedman 1998; Enright & Fitzgibbons 2000.

[14] Lazare 2004.

[15] Lazare 1995.

Third, in a true apology there needs to be an expression of some sense of pain and sorrow, some sense of hurt, to indicate that the feeling of guilt and shame at what has been done. This means that when someone says that they are sorry, they need to show sympathy and empathy for the suffering of those whom they have hurt. This is hard to describe because different people do it in different ways with different kinds of body language. Some may burst into tears; others may merely show how they feel by how they make they apology.

How can we apply psychological knowledge to situations that require forgiveness?

The psychological knowledge of forgiveness as a human process can be applied, in pastoral situations, to either the offender or offended person. We can begin by considering a person who has offended in some way. It can be important to consider the person's emotional state. The characteristics of guilt, shame, regret, and remorse in Table 1 can be used to do this. As has been explained, those who feel a great deal of shame may be reluctant to acknowledge wrongdoing or even to talk about what distresses them. This sense of shame needs to be recognised and accepted before they are able to move forward in repentance and, perhaps even eventually, reconciliation. An accepting relationship, in which shame is openly acknowledged and named, is particularly important for healing shame. Movement towards guilt for wrongdoing helps to open the way to appreciate the real effects of the wrongdoing.

Alternatively, people may exhibit a sense of guilt or remorse as they realise how they have failed in word and deed, by commission and omission. Apart from confessing their sins and seeking God's forgiveness, they may find it helpful to consider how they may change now and in the future. They may also consider how they can make up for their wrongdoing by an appropriate act of reparation. If they wish to make an apology, they should consider whether this is in the best interests of the wronged person and whether it should be linked with the apology or not. An apology should include an admission of the offence with its consequences, an undertaking to change and an expression of sorrow at the hurt from the offence.

In helping those who have been wronged, it is important to identify how they actually feel. Some may feel strong anger, which may not be immediately apparent. Others may feel so shamed that an accepting approach which acknowledges their shame may be necessary. Guilt and regret may also be present. It may be helpful to discover why they feel guilty and to consider whether their guilt is legitimate or not. A final piece of psychological research is relevant here. Those who report guilt rather than shame in the same situations are also more likely to report a greater degree of forgiveness.[16] If they are ready to talk about forgiving others, then the psychological process model of forgiveness may be helpful. At a later stage, they may consider whether reconciliation with those who have wronged them is appropriate, and how it can best be achieved.

Finally, it is worth noting that the areas of psychological knowledge described here apply both to those who offend and those who have been offended.

In sum: there is much that can be learnt from the psychological study of forgiveness as a human experience. While it is true that psychology cannot investigate God's

[16] Konstam, Chernoff, & Deveney 2001.

involvement in human interactions, it can show and does show how wrongdoing affects both those who do wrong and those who are wronged. Distinguishing the process of forgiveness from the process of reconciliation from a human point of view can also help people to deal with wrongdoing in their personal relationships and work towards reconciliation with those whom they have offended and those who have offended them.

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THE THEOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS AND ITS ENACTMENT

This part of the study examines how God communicates His forgiveness to people through the church so that they can be reconciled Him and to each other. It discusses how God forgives repentant wrongdoers by pardoning them and explains how He restores those who have been wronged by healing them.

The Delivery of Forgiveness

Jesus, the Son of God, was sent by His Father to take away the sins of the world (Matt 1:21; John 1:29) and to speak His Father's word of pardon to sinners here on earth (Matt 9:3-8; John 5:24). He does not just pardon the evil deeds that they have done but frees them from the sinful state of mistrust of God and rebellion against Him. He speaks God's word of grace to those who are guilty of rebellion against their Creator and under the sentence of eternal death from him for their rejection of Him. That word of pardon is his final judgment which they hear already now, long before they stand before His tribunal at the end of the world.

God's word of forgiveness differs from human forgiveness. It does not just voice His acceptance of sinners because He has graciously decided not to hold their sins against them, as we do when we forgive someone. Rather, by the life, death and resurrection of his Son He takes upon Himself the weight of their sin, frees them from entrapment in it, and makes them right with Himself. By His word of pardon He frees ungodly sinners from the guilt of sin, the sentence of spiritual death, and the power of the devil; by it He reconciles them to Himself and to their brothers and sisters in His family.

By His life, death, resurrection, and ascension Jesus has become the judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Tim 4:1). God the Father has entrusted all judgment to Him (John 5:22, 25). This means that He determines the eternal destiny of all people by speaking His word of absolution, or withholding it from them. That word of forgiveness is the key that opens the door to His Father's house, admits people to His royal presence, and gives them access to His grace. Those who hear and believe that word no longer face the awful prospect of condemnation at the last judgment, since they have already now passed from death to life with God the Father (John 3:17-18; 5:24). They may approach the Father with the full assurance of faith and serve Him with a good conscience (Heb 9:14; 10:22).

The Role of the Church as a Forgiving Community

The risen Lord Jesus delivers His Father's word of judgment to sinners (Acts 10:43; 13:38-39) in and through the church which He has established as a forgiven, forgiving community (Matthew 16:18-19; 18:15-35). He therefore appointed the apostles and their successors in the apostolic ministry to bring His forgiveness to repentant sinners; He also gave them His Holy Spirit, so that they could work with Him in forgiving sinners (John 20:21-23; 2 Cor 5:20-6:1). They are authorised to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations in the name of Jesus (Luke 24:47).

There are three parts to Christ's delivery of forgiveness in and through the church. First, Jesus Himself actually forgives people their sins in the divine service. There, on the one hand, He diagnoses sin by the preaching of God's law which leads sinners to repentance, and He offers pardon to penitent sinners through the proclamation of the gospel. There, on the other hand, He delivers forgiveness personally through the water of baptism (Acts 2:38) and frees people from sin with His cleansing blood in Holy Communion (Matt 26:28; 1 John 1:7). By His blood He does not just forgive us our sins; He too cleanses us from all abuse, all injustice (1 John 1:9). By His forgiveness He not only pardons the offender, but also releases both the offending person and offended person from spiritual damage done by the evil deed.

Second, Christ has appointed pastors as ministers of the gospel to work with Him in His personal delivery of forgiveness. He authorises them to exercise the keys together with Him in the congregations that they serve (Matt 16:18-19; John 20:21-23).[17] The Augsburg Confession teaches that pastors use the keys to deliver forgiveness by baptising, preaching the gospel, giving the absolution,[18] teaching right doctrine, and admitting people to Holy Communion (Augsburg Confession 28:5-10,21-22). They, most obviously, exercise the keys by pronouncing the absolution person to person or in the congregation. By that absolution they admit those whom they absolve to Holy Communion. The absolution which they speak does not just assure people that they are forgiven; through its enactment God the Father actually forgives them.

Third, the risen Lord Jesus involves all the members of the church in His delivery of forgiveness to each other and the world.[19] Since they have been forgiven, they are to gently rebuke fellow Christians who do not acknowledge that they have sinned, pray for their forgiveness, and forgive them when they apologise for what they have done (Matt 18:15-35; Luke 17:1-4; Gal 6:1-5; Eph 4:32). They are expected to seek reconciliation with any fellow Christian whom they have offended and angered (Matt 5:23-26). In their given social location they are also called to practise positive retaliation with those who are outside the church by repaying evil with good and blessing those who abuse them (Rom 12:14-21; 1 Pet 2:21-25; 3:9-12). Corporate prayer plays an important part in all this, for the church does the work of God in prayer (Matt 18:18-20). In the Lord's Prayer the members of the church therefore

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[17] As the Messiah Jesus is the one who holds 'the key of David,' the key that opens the door to his Father's presence by forgiving those who are sinners (Rev 3:7,8). In Matt 16:19 he shares 'the keys of the kingdom of heaven' with Peter as the head of the apostles. The image there is of Peter as the doorkeeper of the king's palace. By forgiving or withholding forgiveness he either admits or excludes people from approaching the king and gaining help from him. The 'keys' is therefore a technical theological term for the exercise of forgiveness in the church. The 'office of the keys' refers to the authority and responsibility of a pastor to admit people to God's royal household in baptism and to the table of the heavenly King in Holy Communion.

[18] Absolution means 'release' from sin, liberation from the penalty for it. The absolution is a performative utterance by which a pastor actually forgives repentant sinners by the authority of Christ. This is the authorised formula for it as it is spoken by the pastor at the beginning of the Communion Service: *Christ gave to his church the authority to forgive the sins of those who repent, and to declare to those who do not repent that their sins are not forgiven. Therefore, upon your confession, I, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God to all of you, and on behalf of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

[19] We need to distinguish our forgiveness of those who have sinned against us from God's forgiveness of them. When we forgive them they do not necessarily thereby receive God's forgiveness.

work with Christ in the delivery of forgiveness by identifying themselves with those who have sinned and asking God the Father to forgive them too (Matt 6:12; Luke 11:4). They are even called to love their enemies by asking God the Father not to punish and condemn them but to pardon and bless them instead (Matt 5:43-48).

The Purpose of Forgiveness

What then is the purpose of forgiveness? It has to do with our relationship with God the Father as well as our relationship with each other in the church.

First and most obviously, those who are forgiven are justified before God the Father (Rom 5:1). He accepts them and approves of them; He is, in fact, pleased with them and delights in them, since they are united with His Son and share in His righteousness and holiness. They are at peace with Him. There is therefore now no condemnation for them before God (Rom 8:1). They stand before God with a good conscience and have access to His grace through Jesus (Rom 5:2). They have no need to excuse themselves, cover up in his presence, and make up for their sins. Instead, they can approach God the Father confidently in prayer to receive His blessings for themselves and others. So they can now serve God the Father as His holy priests who bring needy people to God and His blessings to needy people.

Second, since they have been reconciled with God the Father, those whom He has forgiven are called to practise forgiveness and seek reconciliation with Christian brothers and sisters in the church. They should seek reconciliation with those whom they have offended and do what is needed to restore their relationship with them, by apologising, asking for pardon, and offering appropriate restitution (Matt 5:23-28). Outside the church, when they have been wronged by unbelievers, they should not pay back evil with evil, or take revenge against those who have abused them, but pay back evil with good (Rom 12:14-21; 1 Pet 2:21-25; 3:9-12). The ultimate goal is, if possible, to seek reconciliation and live at peace with all people (Rom 12:18).

Third, those who have been reconciled with God through the gospel of forgiveness are well-equipped to act as compassionate agents of God's merciful and restorative justice in their communities. Like all other people on earth they still live under God's law and serve Him in the world. They are therefore called to exercise justice in their station and vocation in the world, whether it be in the family or the workplace, in public life or in the church. They are called to use the Ten Commandments to ensure that those around them are not abused but receive fair treatment. They are well-placed to do so because they know that even though God requires all people to act justly, He expects his people to be merciful in judging others (James 2:13).

In his Small Catechism Luther quite rightly connects this responsibility for doing what is just directly with his teaching on private confession and absolution. Those who wish to receive God's absolution should examine their conscience by considering their unique God-given social location with its responsibilities in the light of the Ten Commandments.[20]

So in preparation for private confession we are encouraged to reflect on whether we are a father or a mother, a son or a daughter, an employer or employee; whether we have been disobedient, unfaithful, lazy, ill-tempered, or quarrelsome; whether we

[20] See *The Small Catechism, The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 4:17-23, Robert Kolb and Timothy John Wengert (eds.), Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2000, 360.

have harmed anyone by word or deed and allowed anyone to be abused; whether we have stolen, neglected, wasted, or damaged anything. And so on! The accent here is on our own acts of injustice rather than those done by others. As forgiven people we are to act justly and fairly in our dealings with others. It is worth noting that the acts of injustice that cause the greatest spiritual damage come from the abuse of power by parents, husbands, employers, leaders, and pastors (Matt 18:6-9; Luke 17:1-3). Those who hold these positions represent God in them. So their abuse of power is the abuse of their God-given authority which does great spiritual damage to those who are hurt by it.

The Practice of Confession and Absolution in the LCA

Most Protestant churches, quite rightly, emphasise the need for us to confess our sins in keeping with the instruction given in 1 John 1:8-9:

> *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he (God the Father) is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

They argue that since Christ has won forgiveness for us by His death on the cross, we are all already forgiven. They therefore do not offer an absolution to people who feel guilty and condemned by God. No human being can do that, they quite rightly say; only God can.[21] Instead, they deal with guilt in two other ways which are not, in themselves, wrong ─ but they make guilty people rely on their own resources rather than God's promise and gift of pardon. On the one hand, they reassure those who are guilt-stricken that they are already forgiven and urge them to accept that as a fact. On the other hand, they also urge Christians to confess their sins in prayer to God and, in some cases, to each other, so as to get rid of their guilt. So by the act of confession, guilty people appropriate the forgiveness that is already theirs.

Many Christians believe that a verbal confession is not enough just by itself, for repentance must accompany confession. People must not only say that they are sorry for what they have done; they must feel sorry about it, really and truly sorry. Demonstrably so! In fact, the verbal act of confession is meant to express that sorrow. In itself it is not enough unless it is truly heartfelt. So then, for them, the assurance of forgiveness depends on the feeling of contrition and its authenticity. This teaching is rather damaging pastorally. It not only contradicts the Biblical teaching on justification by making forgiveness depend on how we feel; it also creates uncertainty about salvation.

In contrast to this common teaching, the Lutheran church emphasises the enactment of forgiveness in confession and absolution. Thus in the Small Catechism Luther gives this explanation of confession:

> *Confession consists of two parts. One is that we confess our sins. The other is that we receive the absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the confessor as from God himself and by no means doubt but firmly believe that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.*[22]

Two things are noteworthy in this practical definition. First, the emphasis here rests on a verbal confession, an apology to God the Father rather than on contrition, the

[21] This is only partly true. God has authorised Jesus to forgive sins and to commission his disciples to do so too (Matt 9:1-8; John 20:21-23).

[22] Kolb-Wengert, p.360. Note the similar definition in the Large Catechism: 'confession consists of two parts. The first is our work and act, when I lament my sin and desire comfort and restoration for my soul. The second is a work that God does, when he absolves me of my sins through the word placed on the lips of another person' (Kolb-Wengert, p.478).

subjective sense of regret and sorrow for sin. Yet this does not belittle the importance of contrition; it, in fact, recognises that by ourselves we cannot produce it, for true contrition comes from God himself through his law that accuses us of sin (Rom 3:20) and the Holy Spirit who alone can convict us of sin (John 16:8-9). Second, great weight is placed on the reception of forgiveness from God through the spoken words of absolution. We confess our sins in order to receive the absolution. We receive forgiveness in faith by believing what the words say and taking them as from the mouth of God.[23]

Three Kinds of Confession

While anyone may confess their sins privately and directly to God and ask him for forgiveness[24] as we do in the Lord's Prayer and with some psalms,[25] there are three established rites for confession in the LCA. They differ from each other in their context, character and purpose.

The **first** kind is the corporate rite of confession and absolution at the beginning of the divine service. In it the congregation confesses its sins in general terms to each other and to God (James 5:16; 1 John 1:9) in order to receive the word of absolution from its pastor as from the mouth of God (John 20:23). By this absolution repentant sinners are admitted into God's gracious presence and to the Lord's table. With it the pastor exercises the Office of the Keys in that service so that the members of the congregation can serve God with a good conscience (Heb 9:14) and approach the heavenly Father in the full assurance of faith as they hear His word and receive Holy Communion (Heb 10:19-22).

The **second** kind of confession is a private pastoral rite by which a person confesses to a pastor in his official capacity and receives the absolution from him.[26] The context for this is a conversation in which a pastor offers pastoral care to a person with a guilty conscience. In it a guilty person is not required to confess all sins but only those that weigh upon the conscience, as is taught in the Small Catechism: 'before the confessor we are to confess only those sins of which we have knowledge and which trouble us.'[27] Since the pastor is bound by a vow of silence to respect the confidential nature of the confession,[28] the guilty people can be honest and frank in owning up to what has been done, without any fear that what they confess will be abused or held against them.

The absolution, which is offered personally by the pastor in his official capacity, provides the highest possible degree of certainty for the one who receives it. It is a performative word that does what it says, an authoritative enactment by an ordained

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[23] Luther discusses all this simply and well in his explanation of 'Repentance' in the *Smalcald Articles* 3.3 (Kolb-Wengert, p. 312-319. There he distinguishes 'active contrition,' which is self-produced and so contrived, from 'passive contrition,' received and receptive contrition, true heart-felt sorrow that is worked in us by God and received in faith (3.3.2, p.312).

[24] Here we do not consider the apology that is made by an offender to an offended person in order to receive forgiveness and achieve reconciliation. In the Large Catechism Luther says: 'We are to confess our guilt before one another before we come to God to ask for forgiveness' (Kolb-Wengert, p.477).

[25] See the seven penitential psalms: 6; 32; 38; 41; 51; 102; 130; 143.

[26] See 'Private confession and absolution (pastor)' in David Schubert (ed), *Rites and Resources for Pastoral Care*, Openbook: Adelaide, 1998, 27-32.

[27] Kolb-Wengert, *Small Catechism* 4:18, p.360.

[28] Here are the words of the vow made by a pastor of the LCA at his ordination: '*Do you promise to exercise the Office of the Keys in accordance with the word and command of Christ, and keep inviolate the seal of confession?'*

minister who acts with the authority of Christ in His church and serves as His mouthpiece (John 20:22-23). He speaks the word of forgiveness both on behalf of Christ and on behalf of the church.

It is important to note that a pastor may in some circumstances withhold the absolution. Christ did not just authorise his ministers to forgive sins; he gave them also the responsibility to retain the sins of those who did not repent (John 20:23). This means that no one can demand an absolution from a pastor. Instead the pastor must exercise discretion and judgment as to whether the absolution is given or not. He must, indeed, withhold the word of forgiveness from those who do not own their sin and accept God's judgment on them, from those who excuse themselves and seek divine sanction for their sin.

The context of private confession and absolution determines its special purpose and status. It is offered to those believers 'whose consciences are burdened or who are distressed and under attack' from Satan, the accuser of the faithful (Small Catechism 4:29, Kolb-Wengert, 362). Satan accuses and condemns them for their past sins in order to give them a bad conscience and shake their faith in Christ; he uses their guilt to confuse them spiritually and keep them from hearing the gospel and receiving Holy Communion.

So in private confession and absolution the pastor-confessor is required to exercise spiritual discernment. He must first scrutinise and diagnose the actual spiritual state of a person's conscience. The actual cause of guilt needs to be discovered with the help of God's law and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Misplaced guilt which concentrates on a trivial or imagined offence must be distinguished from true guilt that comes from breaking God's law. The confessor must then decide whether to forgive or retain sin in each particular case. If people merely wish to make excuses for themselves and get God off their backs, if they refuse to submit to God's word and intend to continue in their sin, the confessor withholds the absolution. Since they do not confess their sins but wish to justify themselves before God and the confessor, they remain under accusation. If they admit their sin, accept God's judgment on them, and seek pardon rather than escape from accountability, the confessor pronounces the absolution.

As appropriate, the confessor will also advise those who have been absolved that the absolution does not shield them from the physical and temporal consequences of their sins, nor does it exempt them from making appropriate restitution to the victim of their sins. If they have broken the law, the confessor will urge them to own up to it and accept the legal penalties for what they have done.

The **third** kind of confession takes place privately before another Christian. Here is how this kind of confession is described in the Large Catechism:

> *This comes into play when some particular issue weighs on us or attacks us, eating away at us until we can have no peace nor find ourselves sufficiently strong in faith. Then we may at any time and as often as we wish lay our burden before our brother or sister, seeking advice, comfort, and strength* (Kolb-Wengert, p. 477).

This normally occurs during a session of pastoral care and counselling with an elder or deacon or layworker or any other Christian friend. The authority for serving as a confessor comes from their status as members of God's royal priesthood. As such they can bring the sins of others to God in prayer and bring his forgiveness to them with his word. In hearing this kind of informal confession the confessor is not required to scrutinise the person and make a decision about whether to withhold forgiveness or not. Yet any information must be treated confidentially.

The actual rite is rather informal and flexible.[29] It varies from case to case. It may include a relevant word of God, prayer for and with the person, an act of confession, and a declaration of forgiveness. Where appropriate, the layperson who has heard the confession encourages and helps the person to be reconciled with those who have been hurt by the offence. The purpose of this informal rite is to encourage guilty people to unburden themselves and to comfort them by telling them that God has forgiven them and using an appropriate passage from the Bible to reassure them. It is not used to admit or exclude a person from Holy Communion. If pastoral carers cannot deal with what emerges, they refer the person to a pastor.

Spiritual Help for the Victims of Sin

While the Lutheran church has always offered clearly defined pastoral help to those who have sinned and seek forgiveness, it has often neglected those who have been sinned against, the victims of sin. This issue has been brought to our notice by the problem of sexual abuse in the church. Yet even apart from that, this issue requires urgent attention in the LCA, for the victims of sin also suffer damage like those who have sinned (Matt 18:6-9; Luke 17:1-3).

The cycle that sets in with the experience of abuse by the victims of sin is much more complex and convoluted than the cycle of guilt from sin. It has been well described in '*Rites and Resources for Pastoral Care'*:

> People who are hurt by evil acts may be angry with the offenders and want to condemn them. When this anger is cherished, it breeds bitterness and resentment, ill will and malice, hatred and rejection, slander and revenge. It may lead the angry person into self-righteous sin in reaction to the evil deed. The devil may use the hurt to stir up inappropriate anger by reminding the victim exaggeratedly of the injury, by inciting resentment and hatred towards the offender, by urging 'justified' revenge, and by raising doubts about the goodness and providence of God. If the victims of an evil deed feel violated and contaminated by someone, the devil may attack conscientious people by making them feel guilty about their anger, ashamed of themselves, and worthless in the eyes of other people and of God. This may generate self-pity, self-hatred, depression, and despair of God's grace, which may result in withdrawal from participation in public worship and withdrawal from Christian fellowship.[30]

So, while the presenting symptom for sin is a guilty conscience, the presenting issue for those who are victims of sin is most often anger. Anger is the best index of abuse, just as its disappearance is the best index of healing from abuse.

Healing from Abuse

God offers five main kinds of help for the victims of sin in the church. He invites them to unload on Him; He cleanses them with the waters of baptism; He offers healing for them in Holy Communion; He requires sinners to settle matters with the victims of their sin; He assists them to forgive those who have sinned against them.

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[29] See 'Private confession (layperson),' David Schubert (ed), *Rites and Resources for Pastoral Care*, Openbook: Adelaide, 33-38.

[30] David Schubert (ed), 'Anger,' *Rites and Resources for Pastoral Care*, Openbook: Adelaide, 1998, 130.

First, just as those who have sinned can confess their sins to God to receive pardon from Him, so those who are victims of sin can share their experience of abuse with Him and receive help from Him. In 1 John 1:8-9 the apostle says:

> *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

The Greek term for 'unrighteousness' also means 'injustice.' God does not just forgive the unrighteous things we do; He also purifies us from the unrighteous things that are done to us. It is right, then, for us to divulge to God the sins that have been committed against us as well as the sins that we have committed, for we are all stained by both. The blood of Jesus, which 'purifies us from all sin' (1:7), cleanses us from the taint of abuse and injustice, the sense of defilement that besets the victim of sin.

We may, then, unburden our hearts to God by confessing our hurt and anger to Him. In fact, Paul urges us to do just that in Ephesians 4:31 where he says: *Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, with all malice.* The language here indicates that God is the one who alone can remove the spiritual effects of abuse from us.[31] That is what Christ does for us when we unload on Him. When we hand it over to Him in prayer, He gets rid of it for us.[32]

God provides help for us in doing this with some of the psalms of lament.[33] Typically, they begin by complaining to God in general terms about the evil that has been experienced. In this complaint, which is often full of hurt and anger and outrage, the victims of sin tell God how they feel about the evil deed, the enemy who has done it, and God who has failed in his duty of care for them. From there they go on to ask God for help and restoration. As they do this they often express their desire for revenge and appeal to him for justice against their enemy. These psalms mostly end with the prospect of renewed thanksgiving and praise after the experience of deliverance and restoration.

Second, God the Father washes us clean and gives us new a birth through the Spirit-filled waters of baptism (Tit 3:3-7); cf. 1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:25-27; Heb 10:24). There He not only washes away the guilt of sin, but also washes away the corrosive stain of malice and envy and hatred. He pours out His Holy Spirit on us, who puts to death our old polluted self and gives us a new holy self by uniting us with Jesus. In baptism He frees us from the old sinful way of life that is based on repaying evil with evil; he provides a new way of life that is based on the forgiveness of sins, a way of life in which the Holy Spirit detoxifies and renews us. So baptism gives a new foundation for us who are all victims of sin. It helps us to renounce unrighteous anger and bitterness and resentment and malice and hatred and slander and vengeance as the works of the devil as we put our trust in the triune God for our deliverance from the evil that has been done to us. We may therefore begin and end each day by recalling our baptism as we turn away from all evil and seek help from God.[34]

Third, Jesus helps those who are victims of sin by giving them his blood in Holy Communion. His blood cleanses them and gives them a good conscience (Heb 9:14; 1 John 1:7). That includes cleansing from the stain of abuse and injustice, the

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[31] Grammatically speaking, Paul uses a third person passive imperative.

[32] It is significant that only after Paul has urged his readers to hand over injuries to God does he tell them to forgive each other in Eph 4:31-32.

[33] See psalms 6; 13; 22; 35; 38; 40:11-17; 55; 56; 59; 64; 69; 88; 140; 142; 143.

[34] In his Small Catechism Luther, helpfully urges us to relive our baptism by making the sign of the cross as we say: 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

pollution of bitterness and resentment and hatred. It is likely that in Matthew 26:28 Jesus includes this benefit when he says that his blood is 'poured out for many for the remission/forgiveness of sins.' The Greek word for 'forgiveness' includes the idea of 'release,' 'liberation from slavery and imprisonment.' That is how it is used in Luke 4:18 where Jesus speaks about bringing 'release' to both the captives and to the oppressed. Like the year of jubilee in the Old Testament,[35] the amnesty that Jesus proclaims by preaching the gospel is far-reaching; it includes the forgiveness of sins, liberation from bondage to sin, sickness and the devil, and the restoration of creation to its proper state of harmony with its Creator; it culminates in the resurrection of the body and life with God in heaven.[36] So in Holy Communion Jesus offers His blood for release from the stain of sin for the victim as well as release from the guilt of sin for the sinner. Through Holy Communion those who are victims of abuse receive healing from the wounds of Jesus (1 Pet 2:24).

Fourth, in Matthew 5:23-26 Jesus puts the onus of reconciliation on those who have angered their fellow disciples by sinning against them. Since they themselves have been forgiven, they have no need to justify themselves and defend their behaviour. He requires them to take the initiative in making up with those whom they know that they have hurt. They are to seek reconciliation with their adversaries. This involves approaching them in a friendly way without acting defensively, hearing them out, apologising to them, and asking for forgiveness from them. They are to make an effort to win them back as friends and so restore their relationship with them. They, if possible, should try to settle matters out of court, before the trial begins and justice is done. If they refuse to settle matters personally, face to face in a friendly way when the opportunity arises, they may face the full weight of God's judgment in His final court of law. By their refusal to seek reconciliation they may forfeit God's forgiveness of them. By putting the responsibility for reconciliation on the offender, Jesus gives those who have been offended a chance to escape the dead end of anger, with its fixation on injustice, and its endless replaying of the offence.

Fifth, Christ encourages and empowers Christians who have been offended to forgive their fellow Christians who have offended them, just as they themselves have been forgiven (Matt 6:14-15; 18:21-35; Luke 17:4**).** He Himself models how this can be done and sets an example for us in doing this (Luke 23:34; Eph 4:32-5:2; 1 Pet 2:21-23). But this cannot be enforced or done prematurely. It comes, if possible, at the end of the process outlined above to complete the process of healing.

To prepare us for this and, in some cases like incest, where face to face forgiveness may not be possible, Jesus gives us His prayer, the Lord's Prayer, with its remarkable fifth petition (Luke 11:4). In it Jesus identifies himself with us and our sins as He asks God the Father to forgive us, to release us from sin. And we join with Jesus in praying for the Father to forgive us, as we, there and then, forgive those who have sinned against us.

Since Christ gives us His own words we are able to do what does not come naturally and easily to us. We no longer desire God the Father to withhold His mercy from them and condemn them; instead we ask Him to forgive both us and them as we ourselves forgive them before God. We, as it were, give up the 'right' to reject them, since God has not rejected them. So we stop damning them in our own hearts and no longer demand that God should deal with them according to the strict letter of his law. With our forgiveness of them before God, the theological process of forgiveness

[35] See Leviticus 25:8-55.
[36] See Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Concordia Commentary, Concordia: Saint Louis, 1996, 192-93.

is complete. Yet in another sense that process is not yet complete. It is enacted day by day as long as we live, for the old self that excuses its sins and damns others for their sins is with us until we die and are raised bodily with Christ.

Living without Condemnation

God sent His Son to bring us forgiveness, so that we can live our lives here on earth without condemnation (John 3:16-18; 5:24; Rom 8:1). Since we are forgiven we are free from the crippling fear of condemnation by Him, free, too, from obsessive desire to condemn those who have hurt us. We are free from Satan's use of God's law, to damn us in our hearts by recalling the evil things we have done, and to damn others in our minds by recalling the evil things they have done to us. We are also free from the fear of rejection by others and their disparagement of us. Our conscience is free from the taint of guilt and fear as well as the stain of unrighteous anger and toxic hatred.

Since we have a clear conscience we are open to receive from God and to pass on to others what we receive from Him. We are free to forgive just as we have been forgiven**.** We are free to love others as God loves us. We are free to live boldly and act confidently without anxiety about the future and what may hold for us. We are free to live fearlessly no matter what happens to us. For if God is for us, if He accepts and loves us, no one can ever be against us and nothing can ever separate us from the love that He has lavished on us in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:31-39). We can sing with Robin Mann:

> *We're free from our sin and we're free from our past,*
> *free from the chains of the past;*
> *free to be lovers and givers and friends,*
> *free to be people at last.*[37]

[37] Verse 5 of the song 'Face to Face,' number 71, *All Together Now*, Lutheran Publishing House, 1980.

UNDERSTANDING FORGIVENESS

Here are questions which are commonly raised both by those who have been sinned against, and by those who have offended. They are meant to help Christians understand how forgiveness and reconciliation work in daily life and in the life of the church.

'If God forgives, why can't I forgive and forget? If I find it so hard to forget when I have been wronged, even when God has forgiven the offender, does this mean I am not a good Christian?'

How often haven't we been encouraged to 'forgive and forget,' as if they were they same thing! Yet forgiving is not just a matter of forgetting a wrong that has been done. If this were the case, most wrongs would not be forgiven but merely overlooked. An offence can only be forgotten if it is completely rectified. So, strictly speaking, God alone can forget because He alone can undo something evil that has been done.

The purpose of forgiveness is not that we become good friends with an offender by somehow overlooking and excusing a sin, or by no longer blaming the offender and foregoing justice. Forgiveness needs God's help, for by ourselves we cannot undo the evil things that we do to each other. Forgiveness is painful, because the hurt from an evil act is often deep. It hurts us to face our own culpability, or to admit how damaged we feel by what has been done. Sin, however, needs to be faced honestly – before God, before the wronged person or the offender, before our community, and, perhaps even before a confessor. Such honesty is very painful.

What is forgiveness, then, if it's not a matter of brushing aside the offense? It is our reliance on Christ's death and resurrection to remove the toxic effect of anger and bitterness from us. It involves giving up our absolute right to take revenge and pay the person back for what has happened. It means turning our focus away from the wrong deed and looking at the wrongdoer with understanding and compassion, so that we are ready to ask God to remove resentment from our hearts. It is an assertion that Christ also died for those who sin against us. It is getting to the point when we can pray for them and God's blessing on them. It is receiving strength to do this from God who accepts us and wants us to bring healing into our broken relationships.

So be patient with your self and with the offender! God is!

'Do Christians have to forgive those who've sinned against them, even if the offenders refuse to admit guilt and ask for forgiveness? Do people have to ask for forgiveness before we can forgive them?'

Forgiveness is not dependent on the other person. In the Lord's Prayer we commit ourselves to forgive all 'those who sin against us.' That may include those who do not repent, those who continue to offend us, and those who refuse to have a relationship with us.

This is incredibly hard! It is impossible without the courage and strength which God waits to give us. We see this best in Jesus as he hangs on the cross. He forgives His tormenters, even as they continue their assault on Him.

It is also important to say what forgiveness does not mean. It doesn't mean that we continue to overlook the sin, or accept injustice, or forego blame. It doesn't excuse the sin. It doesn't mean that we necessarily continue to place ourselves in a position where we are open to continued abuse, or that we must again place full confidence and trust in the offender. Rather, when we forgive we give up the right to humiliate or pay back those who have wronged us. We do not hold their sin against them. We do not consider the offense that we have suffered as unforgivable, but we consider the offender as a person whom God too wants to forgive, just as He has forgiven us.

'How long can I wait before I have to forgive someone?'

There is no time limit for forgiveness. Since God is infinitely patient with us, we need to be patient with ourselves and wait until we are able to confront the wrongdoer, without adding to the damage that has been done. Our hurt should not, however, be buried indefinitely. A slow burning anger tends to grow and expand, until it begins to overwhelm us emotionally and even physically. So St Paul tells us 'not to let the sun go down on our wrath'. A counsellor, pastor or friend can help us face our pain, and help us on the path towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

'Aren't there some sins which are unforgivable? Do I have to forgive everything? Aren't there some people who don't deserve to be forgiven?'

Humanly speaking, some things seem unforgivable to us because they cause such deep, lasting damage. Sexual abuse, especially of children, makes us weep with outrage and anger at its lifelong effects. We abhor murder and are aghast at its finality. We find it especially intolerable when such criminals show no evidence of remorse or guilt.

On the other hand, we need also to consider that some such offenders who recognise their sin and are overwhelmed with shame and guilt, to the point of despair, may see themselves as unforgivable because their sins are so evil. All too often we point the finger at the terrible sinners around us, while we all too easily excuse our own trespasses as harmless misdemeanours. We all fall short of God's justice, both as 'big' sinners and as 'little' sinners; no-one deserves God's favourable gaze, His full approval.

As Christians we work towards forgiving the inexcusable, because God has forgiven what is inexcusable in each of us. Even when the offender is fully to blame, our prayer remains: *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.* No-one would claim that this is easy to do. Yet we can forgive others because God gives us his own Spirit to strengthen and equip us to forgive what seems to be unforgivable, even in ourselves.

'It's so difficult to forgive those who have hurt me. How do I forgive them?'

There is no simple method, no how-to-do-it for forgiveness. It is a process which is different for each person and in each situation. It is complicated because people are complicated. But the most important thing is not to wait until we actually feel like forgiving because we are never completely ready to forgive. It does not really matter where and how we start. The hardest and most decisive step is to just get started on it.

A possible approach may be the following:

- Face the hurt and damage, as honestly as you can.
- Don't excuse the hurt or say 'it doesn't matter'.
- Hold the other person responsible for what they did to you, and face the fact that your relationship is damaged. Acknowledge that it wasn't OK and it isn't OK.
- Decide that you are going to have to live with the scales of natural justice unbalanced and surrender your right to get even.
- Realise that the person is a flawed human being who is not entirely evil and try to understand why they are as they are.
- Pray for those who have wronged you, and in time you may actually begin to wish them well and revise your feelings for them. Yet, despite your best efforts, reconciliation may never happen. But if you have taken these steps, the offense will no longer have the power to ruin your life and rule your relationship with that person.

'If I am sorry and say that I am sorry, isn't that the end of it?'

A quick fix is always appealing, but it rarely works that way when we face the consequences of sin. Often a quick apology is like placing a bandage over a raw wound, a hurt that continues to fester and infect the relationship. Since human forgiveness is a **process** of restoration, it may take a long time before it is complete. The wronged person may need repeated reassurances of sorrow and regret. In some cases, a damaged relationship may never fully recover from the hurts that have been suffered.

An apology is not dependent on the attitude and reaction of the recipient. It must be offered humbly and sincerely without any strings attached. But an apology does not absolve the offender from the consequences of their deed, which may involve ongoing animosity, estrangement and blaming. It may even have legal consequences and lead to some kind of punishment before there can be any hope of reconciliation.

The end of some evil deeds in our human experience may come only after much suffering. In fact, they may never be fully fixed for us in our relationships with each other until life in the next world. Their consequences need to run their full course before they come to an end. Yet that is the path we must walk as we work for restoration.

'How can I relate to a person whom I have hurt and who still feels hurt despite my apology?'

An apology is a necessary part of the forgiving process, but it's not the end of it. Sin has multiple and painful consequences, and in each case they are different. The healing process may take a long time; it may be that the relationship never fully recovers. Hurts can be deep and lasting. So the person who apologises cannot demand what they may consider an appropriate response from the person sinned against. There may be no continuing relationship. The injured person cannot be forced to accept any apology but always retains the freedom to reject it.

In this situation, we can respond with patience, sensitivity, and, above all, prayer for the hurting person.

'Can an apology to someone close to me do more harm than good?'

Forgiveness from God comes without strings attached. For us there are no preconditions for His grace that we need to meet, such as whether or not we have faced the wronged person and made an apology. But the full process of repentance and reconciliation includes facing the person against whom we have sinned and confessing our wrongdoing to them. This is a painful and threatening process that costs us our self-esteem and pride. In fact, God helps us to do just that. He gives us strength and courage to swallow our pride.

There may, however, be times when love for the wronged person means that we may reckon that full confession to them is much too hurtful and damaging for them. A thoughtless act of confession may heal me, but it may come at the expense of the other person. Love may require bearing the burden of unspoken sin. But even then, we should only do so after seeking guidance from another party. If we withhold confession, it must be for the ultimate benefit of the wronged, not to save our face and reduce our pain.

'What if my sins continue to haunt me, even after I have received absolution?'

Absolution is the precious gift of pardon from God through the mouth of His pastors in church. That absolution assures us that God has spared nothing to keep us close to Him. Through it God actually forgives us no matter what we have thought or said or done. His forgiveness is complete because Jesus did all that needed to be done to take away the sin of the whole world. When God speaks His word of pardon to us, He removes our sin from us and erases all memory of our wrong-doing from His mind. That is the miracle of His divine love!

As humans, however, we are less than loving, even towards ourselves. We often live as if we have not been forgiven, and our memory of past wrong-doing continues to haunt us. We need continual reassurance of God's forgiveness, for we don't quite believe that He has really accepted us for Jesus' sake. Despite our best intentions, we too keep on sinning. There is also the human dimension of consequence for our sins against each other. God forgives us, but we continue to live with the results of our evil thoughts and words and deeds in our earthly relationships. This is part of our human condition, living as freely forgiven, holy people in God's eyes, and existing as frail and fallen human beings in our relationships with each other in an unjust world. So, daily we need to return to God and ask for forgiveness from Him as we pray the Lord's Prayer; daily we need to hear God's word of love and approval by reading His word and meditating on it. Sunday by Sunday we need to go to church to receive His word of pardon to us.

Yet, if we are still haunted by some sins even after we have received that absolution, we should go to a pastor, confess those sins to him as to God, and receive pardon for them from God. That's why Jesus established private confession and absolution. Nothing works better than that in dealing with the sins that bother us.

'Is it true that, since Jesus has died for the sins of the world, everyone is forgiven, whether they know it or not? Surely, all we have to do, then, is to reassure them of God's grace.'

It is true that by his death Jesus reconciled all sinful humans to God the Father and gained forgiveness for every single person on earth. Yet the pardon that Jesus won for us on the cross is now offered to us and all people through His word. It is received by those who repent of their sin and believe in Him, those who turn to God in stark recognition of their unworthiness and guilt and rely on the life-giving sacrifice of Jesus and His resurrection for their restoration to life with God the Father. We

therefore receive pardon by undergoing baptism and listening to the gospel as it is spoken to us, by hearing the word of absolution and receiving Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion. We never possess God's forgiveness but keep on receiving it from Him again and again to free us from sins and their devastation of our world.

Yet we must never forget that this forgiveness cost God dearly. If the church simply reassures people of God's grace, without confronting them with the magnitude of their sinfulness and the gravity of their offense against God's holiness, it makes light of what actually happened on the cross and does nothing to free the sinner from sin. Sinful people do not just need to be reassured of God's grace and pardon for them; they need to be brought to repentance as they listen to God's law which exposes their sin and to receive pardon from God as they listen to the good news of Christ's death and resurrection for them. That, in fact, is the only certain way by which they can actually be assured of God's grace.

'How can a pastor forgive sins if God is the only one who can forgive anybody? And in any case, isn't God always gracious and ready to forgive?'

Because God is always good and gracious we need to use our access to His grace to receive forgiveness and all other spiritual gifts from Him. Since we are justified by His grace, we now have access to His grace (Rom 5:1-2). So Christians may, at any time, confess their sins to God. He has generously promised to forgive all those who come to Him in repentance and trust. They can confidently approach Him directly at any time and in any place 'to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (Heb 4:16)

God the Father has given to His church another gift, the office of pastor who 'in the stead and by the command of the Lord, Jesus Christ' hears the confession of those who recognise their sin and then pronounces His forgiveness to them (John 20:23). These words are God's words, spoken directly through the pastor, so that our ears can hear them. It is as real as if God had spoken. Yet the pastor does not actually forgive sins; Jesus does so by using the pastor as His mouthpiece, His human agent and representative.

The gift in John 20: 23 also contains a warning that offends our ears: *If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.* So we do well not to take forgiveness lightly. It is a serious matter, something that has cost God the Father dearly, the sacrifice of His own dear Son. Yet those who repent need never doubt that Jesus' sacrifice is for them, no matter what they have done, or however much they still feel burdened by their sin. The audible words of the pastor assure them of this grace, for through them God Himself is speaking to them and embracing them.

'Aren't we freed from our own sin and sinfulness at the Lord's Supper?'

Yes, that is wonderfully true! Christ's death and resurrection becomes part of us as we take in His sacrificed body and blood. We receive the body that was offered up to free us from our sins and the cleansing blood that paid for our sinfulness. His body and blood takes away our sins and the sins of all those who commune at the table with us. They heal us from the sickness of sin and cleanse us from the stain of injustice and abuse.

It is also true, though, that sin remains ever-present in our lives, a blight which we try to shake off but can only escape as we, each day, return to the embrace of the

Forgiver and dump it on Him. Even though we confidently leave the table forgiven, we still remain in need of forgiveness and full release from sin. We are fully forgiven by God. Yet we still live in a sinful environment. Others sin against us and damage us for as long as we live. We will not be fully released from the power of sin until we die and are raised bodily with Jesus. Until then, like people on dialysis because their kidneys are no longer working, we need to keep on receiving Christ's purifying blood to help us in our battle against sin and our own ingrained sinfulness.

WIDER READING:
Confession and Absolution

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 'Confession and Communion,' *Life Together,* SCM: London, 1983, 86-96.

Budsissewski, J. 'The Furies of Conscience,' *Touchstone*, 2003. http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-07-127f.

Pless, John T. *Confession: God gives us truth*, Concordia: St Louis, 2006.

Kober, Ted. *Confession and Absolution: Professing Faith as Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, Concordia St Louis, 2002.

Luther Martin. "A Brief Exhortation to Confession,' *Large Catechism*, *The Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), Fortress Minneapolis, 2000, 476-480.

Schubert David (ed). 'Private confession and absolution (pastor)' and 'Private confession (layperson), *Rites and Resources for Pastoral Care*, Openbook: Adelaide, 1998, 27-38.

Stumpf Eric D. 'Private Confession: a Call for Restoration in Pastoral Care,' *Concordia Journal*, 19/3 (1993): 218-233.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The GCC receive this report and make it available to all pastors and registered lay workers in the LCA for discussion and use.

2. The Board for Lay Ministry make *Rites and Resources for Pastoral Care (*Openbook Publishers: Adelaide, 1998) available to all lay workers more cheaply or as a gift with the help of the LLL.

3. The Board for Lay Ministry train lay workers in using the following resources provided in the *Rites and Resources for Pastoral Care* (Openbook Publishers: Adelaide, 1998) for ministry to people who have either sinned or been abused.
   - Private confession (layperson), 39-44
   - Sickness, 52-57
   - Dying, 58-68
   - Grief, 84-90
   - Abortion, 106-111
   - Breakdown of marriage, 112-118
   - Before surgery, 119-122
   - Suicide, 126-129
   - Anger, 130-137
   - Spiritual oppression, 138-145

4. The LCA College of Presidents promote the use of private confession and absolution in the LCA.

5. The LCA College of Presidents appoint an experienced confessor to evaluate or prepare possible questions based on the Ten Commandments, such as given by Ted Kober in *Confession & Forgiveness*, 175-180, to help lay workers and pastors to examine the conscience of people who feel guilty, as well as the conscience of people who are angry at the abuse that they have suffered.

6. Pastors' conferences and lay worker conferences be used to offer seminars and workshops, such as those offered by *Ambassadors for Reconciliation*, to equip pastors and lay workers in the LCA to act as agents of reconciliation and to keep them up to date on the findings of psychological research into the practice of forgiveness and restitution.

7. The College of Presidents appoint suitable persons or agencies to do further work on the pastoral care those who have been damaged spiritually from the abuse that they have suffered.

8. The president of the LCA appoint a suitable person to gather, evaluate and lodge theologically sound, psychologically helpful, and pastorally useful material on confession, forgiveness and restitution on the LCA website.