

Structures of Forgiveness in the New Testament

by Frederick W. Keene

The relationship of forgiveness and repentance is among the most difficult concepts in Christian theology. The argument usually is carried out along the lines of whether repentance is required for forgiveness to be granted, or whether forgiveness is (or should be) granted unconditionally, with repentance required in order to recognize and accept the unconditional forgiveness. The first position usually is regarded as one taken by more “conservative” Christians and, biblically, is based on such texts as Mark 1:4(//Luke 3:3),

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance (*metanoia*) for the forgiveness (*aphesis*) of sins.

The second position is usually regarded as more “liberal,” and finds its biblical roots in passages such as Mark 2:1-12(//Matthew 9:2-8//Luke 5:17-26), especially Mark 2:5,

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven (*aphiēmi*).”

This is a somewhat more nuanced position than the first. It finds much of its basis in Paul’s explicit assertion of unconditional grace, with a classic expression in Paul’s Tillich’s famous sermon, “You Are Accepted.” (Tillich [1948], 153-163)

With respect to forgiveness in human interactions, the model of forgiveness usually is taken to be that of divine forgiveness. This again raises the question as to whether repentance is required for forgiveness, the answer usually depending on the answer accepted with respect to divine forgiveness. Biblically, of course, this can be traced back to such passages as the Lord’s Prayer in the Sermon of the Mount, Matthew 6:12(//Luke 11:4),

And forgive (*aphiēmi*) our debts,
as we also have forgiven (*aphiēmi*) our debtors,

where human beings are to model their forgiveness on divine forgiveness, and possibly find their access to divine forgiveness contingent upon their forgiving others. Snaith, for example, puts forward a version of the “conservative” stance by claiming that the “moral” of the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35) is that the person “who does not forgive cannot repent.” (Snaith [1972], 86) The more “liberal” position, which posits unconditional divine forgiveness, runs into trouble here. It wants human forgiveness to be unconditional too, reading Matthew 6:12 as a description of how the petitioner is to emulate divine forgiveness, not as an expression of the contingency of that forgiveness. Unfortunately, though, the liberal also tends to believe in justice. But if forgiveness is always to be available, would a requirement that the

oppressed and the abused must forgive their oppressors and abusers be just, or even possible? In human interactions, does unconditional forgiveness conflict with a cry for justice-or to reverse the question, does an insistence on justice deny a requirement that the abused must forgive the abuser? These are hard questions, even if they often are raised by those who would support and protect oppressors and abusers, and who would never dream of claiming *divine* forgiveness is unconditional.

An alternative model to the “repentance required” versus “unconditional” models of forgiveness with respect to human interactions can be found by looking at the structure of the way the New Testament treats forgiveness. The development of this model looks briefly at the cultural anthropology of the New Testament world, but primarily examines the words for and ideas about forgiveness that occur in the texts themselves. Once this alternative model is set up, it becomes possible to reexamine justice and abuse issues.

The concept of forgiveness would have been difficult, and sometimes even dangerous, in the agonistic society of the first century Mediterranean world. One person forgiving another would have been seen as laudable only if the forgiver were in a higher socioeconomic position than the forgiven, and hence in a position to act as a patron. Even then, the receiver of forgiveness would have been expected to seek the forgiveness-that is, the receiver would need to offer to become a client, unless already born into clientship. This is because in an agonistic society an offer of forgiveness is a challenge to the honor of the person being forgiven, at least in the case of a male recipient (Malina [1981], 30-33, 79-82; Malina and Neyrey [1991], 49-52); it may have been a positive challenge, but a challenge nevertheless. Such a challenge from an inferior would be an insult, but from a superior or an equal could be accepted. It would depend on how it were proffered. Thus in the first century Mediterranean world, the problem with forgiveness would not be with whether repentance was required, either before it was offered or in order to accept it. The problem with forgiveness would lie in the context in which it was offered or available: who forgave, who was forgiven, and what was the nature of the relationship between them that caused the question of forgiveness to arise in the first place.

This cultural-anthropological picture points to a model of forgiveness, and possibly of repentance, that can be examined in terms of the words and the structures of the New Testament. The model would posit that, from the point of view of the New Testament, interpersonal forgiveness is possible only when, within the context of the interaction in which the question of forgiveness arises, the putative forgiver is more powerful than, or at least an equal of, the person being forgiven. In particular it is not possible from the point of view of the New Testament for one person to forgive another person of greater power. This would mean that if a tenant has a grievance against a landlord as part of their landlord/tenant relationship, the tenant not only is not called upon to forgive, but in fact cannot forgive the landlord so long as that relationship exists-and this is independent of whether or not the landlord “makes restitution.” It would also mean that if a man beats his wife, the battered woman not only is not required to forgive her husband, but in fact *should not* forgive him so long as the hierarchical power relationship exists within the marriage. The tenant can forgive a financial wrong only of

a financial equal (or inferior). A wife can forgive a marital wrong only as a marital equal. Within the Christian context, a landlord might be expected to forgive the debts of his tenants, but he cannot and should not expect to be forgiven for any wrongs he has committed-unless, possibly, he ceases to be a landlord.

From a linguistic perspective, how does this model fit the New Testament? There are only three Greek words used for the verb “to forgive” in the New Testament: *aphiēmi* (ἀφιγμι) with its associated noun *aphesis* (ἀφεσις); *charizomai* (χαριζομαι); and *apoluo* (ἀπολνω). *Apoluo* occurs in the sense of “to forgive” only in Luke 6:37c (twice). It usually means to dismiss or to divorce; it is used in Matthew 5:32//Luke 16:28 and in Mark 10:11-12 in the pronouncements on divorce. Divorce in the New Testament context being a hierarchical process controlled by the husband, Luke 6:37c would carry a connotation of the forgiveness coming from the more powerful person.

The predominant verbs of forgiveness are *aphiēmi* and *charizomai*. The words *aphiēmi* and *aphesis* occur with this meaning almost exclusively in the Synoptic Gospels and in Acts, while *charizomai* is almost exclusively Pauline. *Aphiēmi* and *aphesis* have two basic meanings which can be related. The first is an essentially juridical meaning of “to leave” or “to release.” This can be seen in Luke 4:18, “He has sent me to proclaim release (*aphiēmi*) to the captives.” This can be extended to many cases where someone or something is leaving, for example the earliest disciples leaving their livelihood to follow Jesus in Mark 1:18(//Matthew 4:20),

And immediately they left (*aphiēmi*) their nets and followed him,
and in Mark 1:20(//Matthew 4:22),

...and they left (*aphiēmi*) their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and follow him.

The other meaning is essentially commercial, to remit or forgive, especially a debt. This carries over from both common Greek usage and from the LXX, and can be seen in Matthew 6:12(//Luke 11:14),

And forgive (*aphiēmi*) us our debts,
As we also have forgiven (*aphiēmi*) our debtors,
and in the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Matthew 18:27 and 32,

...and forgave (*aphiēmi*) him the debt...I forgave (*aphiēmi*) you all that debt.

The two meanings can be seen to be related by the use of the noun *aphesis* to mean release from debt or obligation or penalty. (TDNT [1985], 48; Ringe [1985], 65-66) The use in LXX shows a shift from Hebrew words for forgiveness that connote a cultic removal and expiation of sin to Greek words that have juridical and commercial meanings of release or remission. This in turn

gives a religious connotation to the secular words. (Ringe [1985], 65-66, 112-113) What should be noticed, however, is that the words for forgiving and forgiveness now have an implication of a more powerful being, whether God or a person, releasing another from a debt or an obligation or a penalty. The term *aphesis ton hamartia*, forgiveness of sins, takes on an implication of a release from sin (or from the penalty of sinning) or a release from debt; it does not have an implication of a religious or a cultic cleansing.

Paul “prefers the verb *χαρίζομαι* [*charizomai*], ‘to be generous,’ perhaps because it stresses the generous and personal character of God’s action and avoids the juridical associations of *ἀφίημι* [*aphiemi*].” (Quanbeck [1962], 319) *Charizomai*, to give freely, is from the same root as *charis*, which is the word usually translated as “grace” in the Pauline literature. (TDNT [1985], 1298ff) In the New Testament, it occurs only in Luke, Paul, and the deuterio-Pauline literature. In secular Greek, it usually meant “to show pleasure” or “to show oneself to be pleasant.” (TDNT [1985], 1301) In Luke, it usually refers to favors granted to someone (TDNT [1985], 1304); in Acts 4:14, for example, it is said that Barabbas was released as a favor to the people,

But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given (*charizomai*) to you.

In fact, Luke uses *charizomai* in the sense of forgiving debts in Luke 7:42-43,

“...When they could not pay, he canceled [RSV: forgave] (*charizomai*) the debts of both of them. Now which of them would love him more?” Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled [RSV: forgave] (*charizomai*) the greater debt.”

In the Lukan story of Jesus’ anointing by a woman. (We note, however, that when Jesus forgave the woman’s sins in Luke 7:47-48 he used *aphiemi* rather than *charizomai*.) For Paul, though, it is the giving freely part of *charizomai* that tends to be emphasized, as in Romans 8:32,

He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave [or delivered] him up for all of us, will he not with him also give (*charizomai*) us everything else?

This giving freely is almost always by God, and very rarely in the sense of “forgiving” anything, whether sins or debts.ⁱ

For a concept that has achieved such prominence in Christian theology and piety, there are relatively few references to forgiveness of sins, with Jesus’ forgiving of another’s sins, or, especially after the Resurrection, a blending of these two categories in which God’s forgiveness is mediated in some way by Jesus. All of these references are of necessity hierarchical: within the context of the New Testament, God and Jesus are always in a (or the) position of power with regard to sin. Furthermore, the words used are almost always *aphiēmi* or *aphesis*, giving this forgiveness of sin juridical or commercial overtones. When it comes to people forgiving other

people, there are not very many references. When Synoptic parallels are taken together, there are seven such references in the gospels, and four in the epistolary literature.

One of the major themes in the treatment of forgiveness by human beings is its relationship to forgiveness by God. This can be seen in the forgiveness petition of the Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6:12//Luke 11:4,

And forgive us our debts, As we also have forgiven our debtors.	And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
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This relationship can be expressed in several ways, depending on the bias of the speaker. Thus one can say that humans must forgive one another in order to be forgiven by God, or one can say that humans must forgive each other in order to be able to accept the forgiveness of God. The petitions, of course ask God to forgive human beings because they forgive others, leaving open the question of whether God would forgive humans if they did not forgive others. But the petitions do more than that: they set up hierarchy. In Matthew 5:12, the petition says that since "we" have forgiven (*aphiēmi*) our debtors (*opheiletes*), then God should forgive (*aphiēmi*) our debts (*opheile*). These all have a primary reference to commercial or financial terms, although they can be extended to cover spiritual usage, (TDNT [1985], 746-748) Luke does in 11:4 by asking God to forgive (*aphiēmi*) "our" sins (*hamartia*) as "we" forgive (*aphiēmi*) everyone who is indebted (*opheilo*) to us. To be indebted in a commercial transaction is to be in the inferior position; the creditor is in the position of power. Thus the hierarchy is that we forgive those over whom we have power; therefore we can ask God, who has infinite power, to forgive us. Nothing is said about those who have power over us and against whom we might have a grievance. In this situation, forgiveness flows down, from the more powerful to the less powerful.

Forgiveness continues to flow down from the more powerful to the less powerful in the discussion in Matthew 6:14-15 of the forgiveness petition from the Lord's Prayer, and in the similar discussion Mark 11:25. (Mark 11:26, which carries the discussion forward along the lines pursued by Matthew is not admitted into most modern translations.) Here, instead of debts (*opheile*) or sin (*hamartia*), it is trespasses (*paraptomata*) that are to be forgiven (*aphiēmi*), but again in the line of the Father forgiving the person, who then forgives the trespasses of others.

This trend also is found in the unique saying in Luke 6:37-38a in the Sermon on the Plain,

Do not judge, and you will not be judged;
do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.
Forgive (*apoluo*), and you will be forgiven (*apoluo*);
give, and it will be given to you.

(Luke 6:37a parallels Matthew 7:11.) In each of these commands, the clause in the passive voice is in the “divine passive” used to avoid a direct reference to God. This would point to a replication of the power driven hierarchy already seen, except that the word for forgive/forgiven used here is *apoluo*, not *aphiēmi*. In fact, this is the only place in the New Testament where *apoluo* is used to indicate forgiveness. It usually means “to divorce” or dismiss, and is the verb used in the divorce discourses in Matthew 5:31 and 19:7 and in Mark 10:4. Divorce was a purely hierarchical act in biblical times, of course, a fact pointed out in the divorce narratives. The man, who had all the power, could divorce his wife, but she did not have the power to give him “a bill of divorcement.” While a case can be made that Jesus allowed divorce if mutually agreed upon,ⁱⁱ the meaning of *apoluo* contains no hint of mutuality; it was strictly a hierarchical concept where the one with power is the one who performs the action of the verb.

The gospels also treat the concept of forgiveness in two narrative complexes, Luke 7:36-50 and Matthew 18:21-35. Both contain parables or illustrative stories that, while capable of other interpretations, are used to carry on the discussion of forgiveness in the received redactions. The Lukan passage is Luke’s treatment of what in the other three gospels is presented as the anointing at Bethany. A complete discussion of this passage is beyond the scope of this study; Ringe (Ringe [1983], 66-71) studies the Lukan passage, while Schussler Fiorenzaⁱⁱⁱ has an excellent presentation of the Synoptic parallels. The Lukan presentation differs substantially from the others. It not only is removed in time—from the week before the Crucifixion to early in Jesus ministry—and place—from Bethany to Galilee—but also its entire emphasis is different. While the other three presentations emphasize the anointing, and the Synoptics play with the idea that the anointing of the head is both the anointing of the messiah/king and an anointing for burial, the anointing in Luke seems to be secondary. In Luke, the primary emphasis is on forgiveness: forgiveness of the woman, who in stark contrast to the other three gospels is described as “a woman of the city who was a sinner,” but also, in an illustrative story the forgiveness of debtors.^{iv} The story is in Luke 7:41-43,

“A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled [RSV: forgave] (*charizomai*) the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more.” Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled [RSV: forgave] (*charizomai*) the greatest debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.”

The use of *charizomai* for debt cancellation is particularly noticeable here; it emphasizes the “free gift” part of the forgiveness, but does not disguise that Jesus is talking about creditors and debtors, and hence a hierarchy of power. Later in the narrative, when the discussion turns to the forgiveness of the woman’s sins, Jesus ties it to the debt language by switching from *charizomai* to *aphiēmi* in vv 47-48,

“Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven (*aphiēmi*); hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven (*aphiēmi*), loves little.” Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven (*aphiēmi*).”

This illustrates the hierarchical nature of forgiveness even when Jesus forgives sins: a “woman of the city who was a sinner” was near the bottom of any power hierarchy of the time, and Jesus, as a Teacher who was a guest, albeit mistreated, of a Pharisee, was well above her.

The other narrative complex, Matthew 18:21-35, includes the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (vv 23-34), framed by a passage (vv 21-22 and 35) paralleled by Luke 17:3-4,

The Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church [RSV, NRSV margin: my brother] sins against me, how often should I forgive (*aphiēmi*) him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven [RSV, NRSV margin: seventy times seven] times.”

“Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive (*aphiēmi*). And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says ‘I repent,’ you must forgive (*aphiēmi*).”

In Matthew 18:21 the NRSV, presumably reacting to this passage coming at the end of chapter 18, much of which is devoted to “church” discipline, reads “member of the church”; the RSV (and the NRSV margin), reflecting the actual Greek, reads “brother.” (For consistency, the NRSV should read “a brother or a sister.”) This parallels “another disciple” in Luke 17:3. Here is one of the few cases where an absolute hierarchy is not set up; a “brother” or “another disciple” or “a member of the church” is neither above nor below the person offended, but is an equal. While forgiveness is neither expected nor required when the offender is higher in the power hierarchy—indeed, it probably is neither possible nor desirable—it is expected when the person is an equal in the power structure. This frame in Matthew is concluded at verse 35,

So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive (*aphiēmi*) your brother or sister from your heart.

Here the NRSV goes back to its inclusive language convention, and continues to reinforce the idea of equality—but not of forgiving the more powerful. The rest of the verse is an effort within the context of the Matthean redaction to present a particular interpretation of the parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

Within the Matthean redaction, the parable of the Unforgiving Servant is a parable on the necessity of forgiving others.^v A lord (*kyrios*) forgives a slave with a large debt, but this slave refuses to forgive one of his debtors. This causes the lord to revoke the original forgiveness and

turn the unforgiving slave over to the torturers. The verb “to forgive” is *aphiēmi* throughout, emphasizing the financial aspects. The story itself could hardly be more hierarchical, and the way Matthew presents it makes it an almost paradigmatic form of the forgiveness petition in the Lord’s Prayer.^{vi} Yet again, forgiveness comes down from the most powerful to the least powerful—and if the progression is broken at one place it is broken everywhere. As Ringe puts it,

if one opts to live with the pattern of forgiveness, that choice must govern those situations from which one benefits as well as those where one’s own debt is insurmountable. (Ringe [1985], 95)

But the progression of forgiveness can be broken only by a more powerful person refusing forgiveness to a less powerful person. The progression of forgiveness does not move up the structure of power, only down.

The final example of humans forgiving humans within the gospels is also the only example that presents the question of one with less power forgiving those with relatively more power. It is Luke 23:34,

Then Jesus said, “Father forgive (*aphiēmi*) them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

one of the Last Words on the Cross.^{vii} This is a situation where Jesus has no power; he is speaking from a cross about those who have crucified him. What is noticeable is that he does not forgive them. Instead, he asks his Father, he asks God, to forgive them. Having no power within the situation, he cannot forgive. About the only way the structures of power can be invoked for forgiveness is the way Jesus chose: to ask God, who remains all powerful, to forgive. This is the one place where, if Jesus wanted the weak to forgive the strong, he could have indicated it. He did not. He asked the strongest to forgive, and, being the less powerful, did not offer the forgiveness himself. The relative positioning within the power structures remain the same: only the more powerful can be expected to forgive. The less powerful are not expected to forgive, and, in the case of Jesus on the cross, do not forgive the more powerful.

Outside the gospels, there are only three references in the New Testament to interpersonal forgiveness; a fourth, II Corinthians 12:13, is a bit of sarcasm by Paul. All four of them are in Pauline or deuterio-Pauline literature, and, as would be expected, all four use *charizomai* for the verb “to forgive.” The two deuterio-Pauline occurrences are in the context of advice about church life. Ephesians 4:32,

...and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

comes at the end of a section beginning a v 25 with “for we are members of one another.” This is a setting of equality, as in Matthew 18:21-22, although the hierarchical emphasis, with the

human forgiveness stemming from the divine forgiveness is there too. Similarly, the other deuterio-Pauline reference, Colossians 3:13, also refers to the life of the church, as can be seen by beginning at v 12,

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

This is virtually the same as Ephesians 4:32: the equality due to church membership is there, but the hierarchy of power that governs forgiveness is also there. Any hint that the less powerful might be called upon to forgive the more powerful most emphatically is not there.

The remaining passage is the only place in the New Testament where Paul writes about forgiveness by humans, II Corinthians 2:5-11. Here he is addressing a specific incident that seems to have occurred during the period of contention between him and the Corinthian church documented in his Corinthian correspondence. This passage comes in a section of that correspondence that dates from the end of the period of contention, after Paul has brought the church back to his way of thinking. During the dispute, one of the members of the church seems to have affronted Paul in a manner sufficiently unpleasant to have caused the church to exact punishment (vv 5-6). The nature of the punishment is not specified; traditionally, it is held to have been some form of excommunication or "shunning" of the offender. Paul, magnanimous in victory, writes in this section that the congregation should now "forgive and console [the offender], so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" (v 7). Paul continues along this line, a few sentences later saying in v 10,

Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ.

Paul, now being firmly in the leadership position and wielding the power in the relationship, can and does encourage forgiveness. He nowhere indicates that anyone should forgive the more powerful, and, when in the weaker position in the course of the Corinthian dispute, never indicated that he was going to forgive those more powerful than he who had been so offensive to him. In this case, the only one from Paul's writings, the trend in the New Testament continues. Forgiveness is desired between equals in a relationship; when the relationship is unequal, only the more powerful are to forgive. If an offense is committed against the weaker by the more powerful, the weaker are not expected to be forgiving.

This model, based on the structure of forgiveness in the New Testament, is one where forgiveness occurs only when the parties involved possess equal power in the relationship where forgiveness is applicable, or else when the person with the grievance has the greater power within that relationship. Even Jesus in the one case where he was in the weaker position did not forgive those who both were more powerful and had harmed him. Instead, while on the

Cross, he asked God-the most powerful-to forgive them. The fact that Jesus himself did not opt for forgiveness in this situation points to a further possibility, that forgiveness is not even possible when it is to go up the power structure. Surely the idea of a forgiving Christ would tell us that if he could he would forgive. But he did not, and thus no one should be asked or expected to forgive those who retain the power in a relationship where forgiveness might be applicable.

This model of forgiveness provides a tool for addressing several problems in contemporary and biblical theology. In particular, it provides a way of reconciling the apparent dichotomy between the supposed New Testament emphasis on forgiveness (and mercy) and the supposed Hebrew Bible emphasis on justice. In contemporary theology, this dichotomy is nowhere more apparent than in liberation theologies. As Ringe has put it,

...theologians of liberation...seem not to be drawn to the theological motif of forgiveness, and for very good reason...it is heard as a word that would whitewash past abuses whose present consequences continue to be felt. (Ringe [1985], 95)

This, of course, is a point of view not unique to liberation theologies; any theology "from the underside" which takes seriously the conditions of the abused, the hurt, those in pain, will look with much suspicion on almost all treatments of forgiveness. The model of forgiveness explored here would, for example, put the lie to the male clergy who counsel and preach to abused women that they "must forgive." In the social and political arena, forgiveness would be "far from becoming an easy or cheap route of escape for the privileged," (Ringe [1985], 95) as opposed to the way it is commonly preached in American churches.

This model would allow theologians of liberation to address the idea of forgiveness with some specificity within the context of justice. To receive forgiveness, to be forgiven, the powerful would have to do more than "make restitution"; they would have to give up their power. From a Christological point of view, of course, the relinquishing of power at the Cross is the basic requirement of salvation, but it goes beyond the Cross. To return to the Sermon on the Mount, forgiveness by others as well as by God is a prerequisite for worship, and hence for any true relationship with God:

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown in prison. (Matthew 5:23-25)

This reconciliation, which in this case requires forgiveness, must be sought out-first from equals, but then from anyone with a grievance. This forgiveness can be hoped for, and even expected, except from those further down the power scale. To receive forgiveness from them,

power must be relinquished. If this relinquishing of power is to be given a name, it is the *metanoia*, the repentance, spoken of in the New Testament, or the “turning,” the *shub*, spoken of by the prophets.

This relinquishing of power, this *metanoia*, this *shub*, is what the theologians of liberation are talking about when they demand justice. It is the giving up of power that ties together forgiveness and justice. In this sense, the demands of forgiveness—whether *aphiēmi* or *charizomai*—are the demands for *metanoia*, and for justice, the *mishpat* demanded by the covenant through the prophets, and brought about by a “turning” *shub*, back to God. The requirement for forgiveness and the requirement for justice become aspects of the same drive toward fundamental, radical change in the power relationships among people, a drive that cannot help but be revolutionary in a real, material sense. The theologians of liberation have recognized this as part of the demand for justice. They also have recognized that

to move too quickly to “forgiveness”...without addressing the way the patterns of oppression have become institutionalized, risks simply perpetuating the status quo. Before “forgiveness” can find its way back into the lexicon of liberation, it must be linked to justice. (Ringe [1985], 94)

In the requirement that power be relinquished for forgiveness to occur, the link between forgiveness and justice can be established.

Use of this model of forgiveness can be made more focused and given greater specificity and individuality by looking at a specific issue, the recovery of those who have been sexually abused as children. This is an area where the question of relative power is at its starkest, and where the church commonly sides with the abuser and bludgeons the survivor with a doctrine of premature forgiveness. The worst cases of the church siding with the abuser, of course, come in cases of clergy sexual abuse. In these cases the common reaction is for the laity to make excuses for the clergy, often acting as if the survivor were the perpetrator—or just treating the survivor as a liar. The church as an institution tries to protect the clergy by reassigning them to other parishes, as the Roman Catholic dioceses of Chicago and of Labrador have done in recent years, or by devoting its pastoral resources to caring for them at the expense of the victims and survivors. After treating the survivor as though she were at fault, the church then compounds the damage by telling her that she should forgive her abuser. This last is an actual act of abuse by the church itself.

If the church feels that the survivor should forgive her abuser, then, in cases of clergy sexual abuse, it has but one choice. No matter what the ecclesiastical tradition, no matter what official or traditional doctrine of ordination a church as an institution may hold, the reality of the relationship between clergy and laity is one of relative power, with the clergy holding the power of priest and/or pastor.^{viii} So long as the clergy/laity relationship exists, the power relationship also exists, and forgiveness of a clergy sexual abuser by the survivor cannot, and should not, occur. If the church counsels forgiveness, then the church has but one choice: strip

the abuser of his ordination. It should be emphasized that this is not intended as a *punishment* for the clergy. It is a requirement that allows the survivors to forgive, and hence allows the clergy to receive forgiveness. An implication of the New Testament structure of forgiveness is that sexually abusive clergy should be stripped of their status as ordained members of the church.

The power relationship between abuser and abused can be seen in the common example of father/daughter incest. The forgiveness of the father by the daughter typically cannot occur until the relative power relationship has been reversed, when the daughter has reached adulthood and the father has reached old age. This may or may not be a psychological requirement. Only when the patterns of power are reversed can the act of forgiveness be considered.

This requirement that the patterns of power be reversed is the kind of change, of turning around, of *metanoia* or of *shub*, that is meant by repentance. It would then be what Jesus is getting at in Mark 10:21 when he tells the rich man^x to “sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and...follow me,” and later notes (v 25) that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” In this sense, repentance is required for forgiveness to occur, at least between people. But repentance is not required of everyone; it is required only of those with power,^x any power.

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Notes

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, who also wrote the article on *aphiēmilaphesis* in TDNT, noted in 1941 that Paul never uses the phrase *aphesis ton hamaria*, forgiveness of sins, “though it reappears in the deutero-Pauline literature; see e.g., Col 1:14; Eph 1:7,” (Bultmann [1961], 32, n. 1) Paul does use something similar in Romans 4:7-8,

Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven (*aphiēmi*),
and whose sins are covered;
blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.

but this is in a quotation from Psalm 32:1,2 (LXX). Knox and Reumann suggest that Paul is reminded of this because the commercial term “reckoned,” *logizomai*, in Romans 4:5 reminds Paul of these two verses (Knox and Reumann [1991], 213 NT) They pick up on this from v 8 (Psalm 32:2), but could also pick up on it from *aphiēmi* in v 7 (Psalm 32:1).

The poetry of the Hebrew Bible works by placing ideas in parallel; a line of poetry which carries on a pair of parallel ideas or images is called a *bicolon*. The bicolon in v 7 puts “forgiven” in parallel with “covered,” but there is a larger parallelism between vv 7 and 8 that carries the idea

forward (this literary device is discussed both by Miller [1986], 33ff, and by Alter [1985], 10ff) by making it more pointed. “Blessed are those” is refined down to “Blessed is the one” and “inquiries are forgiven” and “sins are covered,” both in the divine passive, are treated more pointedly by “against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.” If “reckon is a commercial term, it makes the meaning of the commercial term “forgiven” (*aphiēmi*) more pointed.

² Countryman, p 180, presents arguments that, when carried to their conclusion, would imply this.

³ Schussler Fiorenza, pp 128ff; the Synoptic parallels are Mark 14:3-9 and Matthew 26:6-13. John’s version is John 12:1-8.

⁴ A careful reading of the four anointing complexes gives the strong feeling that there are two events in Jesus’ ministry reflected here. One is along the lines of Luke’s story, where a woman, probably a prostitute, seeks forgiveness, wetting Jesus’ feet with tears and wiping them with her unbound hair. The other event is the anointing at Bethany story, along the lines of Mark and Matthew. Luke (or his tradition) seems to have conflated the anointing into his story. John seems to have taken these two versions and changed the woman to Mary of Bethany, keeping the detail of unbinding her hair to wipe away the expensive nard makes little sense; see Brown, pp 447-44. Fitzmyer takes a different approach, suggesting that the anointing of the feet is more likely to be original because it makes so little sense, and hence was probably changed, possibly in the oral traditions, to the more reasonable anointing of the head; see Fitzmyer, pp 683-692.

⁵ Some, such as Snaith, would go farther and read the parable as showing the necessity of repentance; he puts it that “there can never be forgiveness without repentance” while the parable shows that one “who does not forgive cannot repent”; see Snaith, p 86. This raises the question of the nature of repentance as well as its necessity.

⁶ Matthew’s interpretation of this parable is basically unsatisfactory, although it does reinforce the point of this study. Matthew identifies the lord (*kyrios*) of this story with God, always a dubious practice when interpreting parables. He then is forced into a reading where God reneges on forgiveness at the first mistake the servant makes in not extending forgiveness himself. This is hardly the action of a faithful God.

An alternative reading can be constructed by looking at the phenomenal size of the first slave’s debt; ten thousand talents can be put into perspective by noting that the annual revenue of Herod the Great, with all of his famous building programs, never exceeded 900 talents. A king who could forgive such a debt cannot be just an earthly king, but can only be messianic. But even the messianic king cannot be relied upon to remain faithful. Thus the parable would be a warning against the expectation of a messianic king. (I would like to thank William R. Herzog II of Colgate Rochester Divinity School for introducing me to this reading.)

⁷ The NRSV margin indicates that this verse may not belong in the Gospel of Luke.

⁸ This is discussed in detail in Fortune, pp 99ff; see especially chapter 6, "Doing Justice and Mercy," pp 108-129.

⁹ The parallels are Matthew 19:21 and Luke 18:22. Note that this is a rich man in Mark, a rich young man in Matthew, and a rich ruler in Luke. He is nowhere a "rich young ruler." The variation in his description seems to point to the evangelists' struggle to define the nature of repentance. Mark and Matthew see him as rich; Luke adds the idea of direct power by making him a ruler.

¹⁰ I write this in Southern California as the Rodney King riots of 1992, the most destructive and bloody urban violence in contemporary American history, are winding down. I find myself drawn to the writings of Hosea, Amos, and Jeremiah to witness to an entire society in need of forgiveness, forgiveness it cannot receive because it is unable and unwilling to reverse the patterns of power. The relinquishing of power can be a corporate as well as an individual requirement.