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Forgiveness: More than a Therapeutic Technique

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Abstract

Although the concept of forgiveness is accepted by many as profitable in promoting personal and relational healing, some have abandoned its historical connection with religious faith. This uncoupling of religion and forgiveness overlooks a progression of healing that both includes and transcends personal healing for the forgiver, and may rob forgiveness of its therapeutic power. A brief discussion of the historical roots of forgiveness is followed by a proposed model of forgiveness that exemplifies the progression of healing proffered by religious faith. Current trends in the forgiveness literature are considered along with their therapeutic implications.

Forgiveness is historically coupled with religion, most notably the Christian religion in which it is the most crucial concept. The Christian Scriptures present a story of salvation where God continuously attempts to redeem a wayward people, to offer them a relationship that is only possible through forgiveness. It is exclusively through God's forgiveness that humanity heals, making it a paramount topic in Christian psychology (Roberts, 1993). Without God's forgiveness people remain in a broken and isolated state. With God's forgiveness they receive a new life (Jn 1:4, 3:36, 5:24; 2 Cor. 3:6), peace (Jn. 14:27; 16:33; Rom. 5:1), joy (Jn. 16:20; Rom. 14:17), and assurance of their salvation (Rom. 8:1; 5:9).

Over the past several years authors have begun to speculate about the potential benefits of employing forgiveness in therapy. It is viewed by some to be an essential component in healing. Forgiveness has been connected with release from anger and bitterness (Fitzgibbons, 1986), restoring broken relationships (Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990), and instilling hope in depressed people (Beck, 1976).

Unfortunately, both Christian and secular authors have generally abandoned its historical connection with religious faith, which is precisely where we find its most profound example of healing in emotional and relational pain. This is hardly surprising as modern psychological theorists, especially Christian psychologists, have been concerned with establishing credibility and have focused on that which is acceptable to the wider psychological community. Incorporating religious ritual into therapy has generally not been acceptable. Yet, forgiveness in the Christian Scriptures is much more than religious ritual. It is a progression of healing where people are confronted with the grace and mercy of God, despite their continual failure to deserve it. They learn to proffer the same grace and mercy to others in full awareness of their own fallibility. If we reduce forgiveness to a clinical technique devoid of this necessary progression, we may be diminishing it to a shallow or ineffective therapeutic procedure that is not likely to produce lasting effects.

The purpose of this article is to evaluate the current trends in the psychological

literature on forgiveness in light of Christian theology, and to discuss the resulting therapeutic implications.

Forgiveness in Christian Theology

The Bible is filled with directives and examples concerning our obligation to forgive. In the Old Testament, God continually forgave and restored a wayward chosen nation. Throughout the periods of slavery, wilderness wandering, judges, kings, and prophets, God's people opted for idolatry and rebellion. In each case, God allowed the consequences of their sin, then graciously forgave and restored broken people and a broken nation.

Humans, created in God's image, also demonstrated the capacity to forgive in Old Testament accounts. In the book of Genesis, for example, Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers who sold him into slavery served to end the tragic alienation of a family attributable to petty jealousy and selfish motivations for power and esteem. Instead of focusing on this deplorable abuse, Joseph reassured his brothers of God's sovereignty and grace in all that occurred. This example demonstrates the social context and effects of forgiveness. Forgiveness can extend far beyond emotional healing for the person who chooses to forgive and "benefit the one wronged, the wrongdoer, the relationship, and perhaps even the community" (The Educational Psychology Study Group, 1990, p. 18).

The New Testament places an even greater emphasis on the importance of forgiveness. It takes a central place in God's instructions regarding righteous behavior (Mk. 11:25; Lk. 17:3; 2 Cor. 2:7). The ultimate act of forgiveness is found in the sacrificial death of Jesus. He was abused, ridiculed, and finally His blood was "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28). His death made relationship with God and each other possible. As with Joseph and his brothers in the Old Testament, God's forgiveness of humankind through the sacrificial death of Jesus introduced the possibility of restored relationships and interpersonal healing.

The New Testament also teaches us to forgive one another. In one of several similar passages, the Apostle Paul instructs, "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). Instructions such as these place Christians in a unique position with regard to forgiveness. We can know our own predilection toward wrongdoing, how we are undeservedly and regularly forgiven, and can use this information to respond in the same forgiving manner toward others. Forgiveness is humble submission to the one who continuously forgives us.

Thus, a Christian understanding of forgiveness begins with a recognition of the depravity inherent in humanity. We agree with Erickson (1985) that "our approach to the problems of society will ... be governed by our view of sin" (p. 563). Christians view sin as an inseparable part of the current human condition (Zackrisson, 1992). It is ubiquitous, affecting every person (e.g., Romans 3), and breaking relationship with God and others. All humans are capable and guilty of either purposefully or unintentionally offending others. Sin cannot be captured in a list of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, but reflects the general condition of humankind (Foster, 1988; Willard, 1988). As a result of our sinful state, humans experience guilt, punishment, and death, become enslaved to further sin, deny and distort reality, and experience broken relationships with God and one another.

(Erickson, 1985). Sinful actions never occur in a vacuum; they are the result of a depraved human condition and routinely affect interpersonal relationships.

An essential part of the salvation process is learning to recognize oneself as an active part of the human problem: humans acknowledge sinfulness and God offers forgiveness and redemption through Jesus Christ. As we comprehend human weakness and propensity toward evil, both in its wider historical context and in our own individual lives, we recognize our need to both give and receive forgiveness. With a mature understanding of our own sin and God's mercy, we are increasingly able to see ourselves as we view the wrongdoing of others. This is not to suggest that forgiveness is easy, but that forgiveness is facilitated by empathy and humility. Lewis Smedes (1984) describes this phenomenon in *Forgive and Forget*:

With a little time, and little more insight, we begin to see both ourselves and our enemies in humbler profiles. We are not really as innocent as we felt when we were first hurt. And we do not usually have a gigantic monster to forgive; we have a weak, needy, and somewhat stupid human being. When you see your enemy and yourself in the weakness and silliness of the humanity you share, you will make the miracle of forgiving a little easier (p. 104).

To forgive another in this way requires humility and self-awareness. Human forgiveness granted in the context of humility and self-awareness reestablishes a sense of equality (Augsburger, 1981) among fallen people in need of God's redemption.

Forgiveness, in this sense, is an act of compassion that comes from one person identifying with the other. It suggests that two people are equally fallible, one responding to the offense of the other in loving identification. St. Francis of Assisi, a 13th century monk, wrote of the personal lesson in humility to be gleaned from another person's offense.

Whom are we to count as our "friends"? All those whose unjust actions and words cause us all manner of grief and trial ... How can I suggest that you should greatly love such people? For this reason: Their evil actions draw out and display to us our own evil responses—anger, gossip, slander, hatred and the like. Then we see our sin for what it is. And only then can we repent and forsake it... (Hazard, 1992, p. 86)

Healing comes as we see ourselves in those who hurt us. We come face to face with our own sin and can turn to God for cleansing. This kind of humility enables us to truly forgive "from the heart" (Matt. 18:21-35). Francis of Assisi also believed that forgiveness must become a way of life for those who profess to love God:

Very simply, you must learn not to be upset over an injury because it is an offense to you. Rather, out of your love for God, train your thoughts on the harm that your enemy is doing to his [or her] own soul with each sin or offense he [or she] commits. (Hazard, 1992, p. 53)

It appears that Francis is proposing unquestioned forgiveness, no matter what the offense. Perhaps he believed that in focusing on love for God and the damage that

the offender is doing to his or her own soul, people are able to respond in love and compassion rather than in bitterness and anger. A person with a heart full of forgiveness is in the unique position of being able to offer a hand of hope rather than one of condemnation, which parallels precisely what God did for humanity. In this paradigm, an act of forgiveness becomes a statement of empathy. One person is essentially saying to the other, "I may not have done exactly what you did, but I am also capable of doing evil."

Forgiveness in Psychology

In Christian theology the process of forgiveness is linked causally to the healing of relationships, emotional healing, obedience toward God, and empathy and identity with the humanness of another. All of these consequences of forgiveness are restorative ones. They are outcomes that bring healing and wholeness to persons both personally and relationally, making forgiveness a topic of profound importance to the psychological community. Over the past several years agents of healing, both Christian and secular, have begun to investigate the potential therapeutic value of forgiveness. The primary thrust of the work done in this area centers around three main perspectives. The first perspective is one in which there is an adamant opposition to any employment of forgiveness in therapy, including its religious connotations (e.g., Bass & Davis, 1992; Miller, 1990). The second perspective is one in which the single goal is to alleviate inner discomfort and relational conflicts. Here, forgiveness is essentially reduced to a clinical technique aimed at providing the client with relief from the often destructive consequences of these types of relational struggles (e.g., Davenport, 1991; Hebl & Enright, 1993; Hope, 1987; Human Development Study Group, 1991; Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990). The third perspective is one in which the authors consider forgiveness to be an extension of theological understanding, or at least mention its theological roots and implications (e.g., DiBlasio & Benda, 1991; The Educational Psychology Study Group, 1990; Enright & Zell, 1989; Pingleton, 1989). A look at specific examples will shed some light on these models.

Opposition to Forgiveness in Therapy

While the gist of forgiveness literature tends to focus on its power as a therapeutic technique, there are several authors who either completely reject it or put severe boundaries on its use. Psychodynamic theorist Alice Miller globally writes against the pursuit of any form of either forgiveness or reconciliation. In her book *Banished Knowledge* (1990), she rebukes her colleagues who advocate forgiveness, and she makes every attempt to distance herself from them. She provides support for this position in a case example in which a man forgave his abusive father and two years later killed an innocent man (Miller, 1990, p. 153). Miller believes that forgiveness is actually detrimental to the patient and is almost always done out of moral obligation. Although Miller's words point out that subtly coercing clients into adopting therapists' values is problematic, we must equally resist the temptation to oppose what could potentially be beneficial to clients. In other words, rejecting an intervention solely because of contrasting personal values can also be a failure to act in the best interest of the client.

Other authors also address forgiveness in discussing sexual abuse. Bass and Davis (1992) in their book *The Courage to Heal* devote a section to the topic of for-

givenness. They maintain that it is only necessary for the sexual abuse victim to forgive her/himself, never the guilty party. For those readers with religious convictions regarding forgiveness, they have this to say:

If you have strong religious ties, particularly Christian ones, you may feel it is your sacred duty to forgive. This just isn't true. If there is such a thing as divine forgiveness, it's God's job, not yours. (p. 150)

They further suggest that it is both "insulting" and "minimizing" to encourage an abuse victim to forgive her or his abuser (p. 150). What these authors categorically dismiss may be what their clients need the most.

While these positions appear to be somewhat rigid and harsh, pursuits of justice for abuse victims by avoiding any form of forgiveness is not without some strengths. Perhaps there is a justifiable fear on the part of some that encouraging forgiveness will cause guilt in clients who are unable or unwilling to forgive, but feel pressured to do so by their therapists. Others may view forgiveness to be utterly ridiculous or infeasible in light of the harm suffered by the client. To forgive would be in some way condoning the harmful action. There may be instances where the specific emotional or situational condition of the client makes it inappropriate to encourage forgiveness, or to even discourage him or her from actively pursuing it. Encouragement to forgive prematurely will likely yield false forms of forgiveness.

Forgiveness as a Clinical Technique

Several authors maintain that forgiveness is advantageous to clients because it helps them release painful and debilitating negative affect. Although these authors make a good beginning in addressing some of the basic elements needed to sustain long-term forgiveness, the required knowledge about forgiveness that the authors call for does not include the historical and theological foundations that promote self-awareness and lead to loving identification.

For example, Hope (1987) offers forgiveness as an effective tool with abuse victims. He portrays the healing benefits of forgiveness through a real case example. The scenario is one where a man, upon becoming involved in an evangelical church group, forgave his alcoholic father for years of heartache, trauma, and abuse. Upon forgiving his father under the direction of a minister, a "dramatic change" took place in him (i.e., his current relationships improved, he became a more active and loving parent, and engaged in less self-deprecating thought patterns) (p. 245). Hope connects this moving transformation to the one act of forgiveness, failing to consider the possible life changing effects of this man's new religious faith. Perhaps what prompted his act of forgiveness was a deep awareness of his own failings and need for forgiveness and mercy. His experience of grace might naturally lead him to adopt the same attitude toward himself and others. In other words, perhaps the whole Christian belief system caused this one act of forgiveness to produce the emotionally beneficial consequences.

Some have noted the connection between clinical applications of forgiveness and theological perspectives, but have suggested that some separation between clinical application and theology is appropriate. Worthington and DiBlasio (1990) promote the facilitation of "mutual forgiveness" in couple therapy, which they believe requires some form of "repentance, atonement, and sacrifice" on the part

of each person (p. 220). Implicitly imbedded in these concepts is religious meaning and a history of religious ritual that epitomize the process of forgiveness. The authors acknowledge this historical link, but go on to explain how therapists have effectively separated forgiveness from its religious ties and successfully incorporated it into their own theoretical paradigms.

Others have advocated forgiveness as a clinical strategy while warning that an understanding of the moral philosophical and historical underpinnings of forgiveness is essential. The Human Development Study Group (1991) recognizes the importance of therapists possessing a sufficient amount of knowledge regarding the definition and process of forgiveness before utilizing it in therapy. They even guard against focusing solely on the reduction of negative affect as an adequate outcome:

A definition that exclusively emphasizes forgiveness as the reduction of negative emotions may lead clients away from resentment or hatred, but into a cold neutrality that is not forgiveness. (p. 494)

In other words, people may think of forgiveness just as they think of "letting go" of an offense. Often this is nothing more than passive acceptance of an injury (Hope, 1987), or a choice to relinquish any plans for revenge. True forgiveness is an active process where a person chooses to absolve the guilty party. Instead of living in a state of "cold neutrality" the person often lives in a loving relationship with her or his offender. The Human Development Study Group expounds on this theme by extending the idea of compassionate forgiveness or forgiving out of "moral love" (p. 493). They also include as an essential component in the forgiveness process an awareness of the need for forgiveness from others. In doing so they boldly address what others might consider to be overtly value laden and thus inappropriate for therapy.

Those most aware of the theological and historical roots of Christian forgiveness find it difficult to simply employ forgiveness as a therapeutic technique. Although some therapists may advocate forgiveness to clients because "it will make you feel better," many Christian therapists advocate a more insightful motive. Human forgiveness first requires us to see our own depravity, then to forgive in loving identification with another fallen human. This type of forgiveness does not always make people feel better, but instead requires them to see themselves and their faults more clearly.

Forgiveness as an Extension of Theological Understanding

Given the rich historical tradition of forgiveness revealed in Scripture, it seems important for Christian psychologists to understand forgiveness as an extension of theological understanding. Several authors have made important contributions in this direction, but it seems clear that our current understanding of integrating theological views of forgiveness with specific clinical strategies is quite primitive.

McCullough and Worthington (1994) conducted a review of the forgiveness literature and concluded that "theological, philosophical, and psychological understandings of forgiveness have not been well integrated" (p. 3). They go on to hypothesize that utilizing forgiveness in a therapeutic context has the capacity for tremendous spiritual implications for clients, which potentially leads to beneficial psychological consequences as well.

Pingleton (1989) begins with a thorough theological perspective on forgiveness and then attempts to integrate it with a psychological perspective. His resulting process is one in which the therapist recognizes and "strives to cultivate" in his or her clients an understanding of what he proposes to be three essential elements embedded in the forgiveness process: "(a) forgiveness can only be received from God if given to others, (b) forgiveness can only be given to others if received from self, and (c) forgiveness can only be given to self if received from God" (p. 33). Although this model is circular and somewhat difficult to follow, it does recognize that the ability to bestow forgiveness on self and others is inextricably linked to the ability to receive it from God. Finally, Enright and Zell (1989) attempt to answer some of the difficult questions related to our attempts to forgive others from a biblical perspective.

Toward an Integrated View of Forgiveness

While none of these perspectives are currently sufficient to understand forgiveness from a Christian perspective, each of them can play a valuable role in constructing a clinically responsible Christian perspective on forgiveness. Those who object to using forgiveness in counseling have offered legitimate cautions about ways forgiveness can be misused. Those who describe forgiveness as a clinical technique have provided useful perspectives on the ways forgiveness can be applied in counseling situations. Those who describe forgiveness as an extension of theological understanding have provided important perspectives, reminding us that a proper understanding of forgiveness cannot be accomplished without considering its philosophical and theological context.

Thus, a responsible Christian model of forgiveness in psychotherapy requires understanding all three perspectives: cautions about misapplying forgiveness in therapy, sensitive clinical applications, and a theological basis for forgiveness. When clinicians use forgiveness in therapy without understanding these three perspectives, they risk incompetence. Several examples are offered here to illustrate the need for all three perspectives.

First, some clinicians might employ clinical techniques of forgiveness without understanding the potential damage that can be caused by introducing forgiveness as a therapeutic goal. Clients who believe they must forgive in order to please a therapist or to fulfill a spiritual obligation have difficulty gaining the necessary insight for true forgiveness. This can lead to words and behaviors that reflect denial more than true forgiveness, with the client choosing conflict-avoidance over direct and honest communication.

Forgiveness happens as past resentments are owned, not dis-owned; are recognized, not repressed; are released, not retained; and are woven into new bonding relationships with others. (Augsburger, 1981, p. 95)

Second, some clinicians may apply a superficial theological understanding of forgiveness without considering the clinical implications and emotional difficulties of forgiveness work. This introduces an unhealthy urgency to forgiveness. The pressure to immediately grant forgiveness is exacerbated by passages of Scripture such as "don't let the sun go down on your wrath" (Eph. 4:26). Christians find themselves "caught in self-tortuous logic" when they insist to themselves that they

must forgive others before they have even dealt with the truth of the injury (Rose-nak & Harnden, 1992, p. 191). Forgiveness should never excuse wrongful behavior, and does not substitute for legitimate consequences of sin (Rosenak & Harnden, 1992). Forgiveness which denies anger, or serves to keep emotions in check, is usually a false form of forgiveness. A typical response in this form of false forgiveness is, "I am not angry, only concerned." The past may be dismissed, but it will not disappear. The anger will stew and grow, or might be displaced onto other relationships. To work through the anger of an offense means confronting feelings and broken relationships directly and honestly.

Third, if a clinician employs forgiveness techniques without understanding the Christian theological and historical foundations for forgiveness, the client may lose significant opportunities for insight and self-awareness. This theologically-deprived type of forgiving can create a mindset of superiority in the forgiven, as if the client believes, "I will forgive you because I live on a higher plane than you, and I refuse to let you drag me down to your level."

Therapeutic Implications

For clinicians who believe that forgiveness is an effective healing tool and wish to employ it with their clients, several strategies can be recommended. First, Christian clinicians need to learn about the history of forgiveness, including its use in the pastoral care tradition. With a thorough understanding of the process of forgiveness in mind, they can teach their clients the process of forgiveness, in part by modeling it in the therapeutic relationship. Clebsch and Jaekle (1975) outline four historical functions of the pastoral care tradition: healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling. Interestingly, these relationship factors apply equally as well to the therapist interested in modeling and employing forgiveness. This is not surprising considering that "long before psychology was a distinct discipline or profession, Christian pastors and spiritual advisors were engaged daily in activities that required what today is viewed as psychological wisdom" (Oden, 1992, p. 137). Although forgiveness may be more readily applied when working with Christian clients, Clebsch and Jaekle's four functions can also be applied in work with non-Christian clients. Therapists can model and affirm the humility and self-awareness they gain from a Christian understanding of forgiveness, and in the process provide clients from diverse religious backgrounds insight into the healing power of forgiveness.

Second, it is important to structure the therapeutic relationship in a way that gives value to the humility and self-awareness required for true forgiveness. Hope (1987) maintains that clinicians are already using forgiveness, consciously or not, when they unconditionally accept their clients despite any shocking information they might reveal in therapy:

Perhaps it is this experience of being valued in the present despite obvious shortcomings and failures in the past that provokes clients into forgiving their pasts, developing a more forgiving attitude in the present, releasing judgments and grievances, and thus creating more options for the future. (p. 241)

Clients are often able to release the grip of shame in their lives as they experience this forgiving attitude. What seemed to be reprehensible and unforgivable thoughts and behavior in their own minds turn into failings that can be rectified in the pres-

ence of the effective therapist. It is usually only through the cleansing of personal forgiveness that people can be promoted to extend it to others. The focus for the therapist is to become an accepting therapist from which client forgiveness is a natural byproduct of the relationship. This is not to say that acceptance and forgiveness are identical; rather a capacity to forgive is fostered by a humble, insightful, accepting therapist.

The therapeutic relationship is the most essential component in effecting positive outcome in psychotherapy. Whiston and Sexton (1993) conducted a review of the numerous studies that attempt to determine what produces the best outcome in therapy. They concluded that it is not the techniques alone that produce positive outcome, but rather the relationship that is vital for therapeutic growth. Techniques are seen to be secondary in that they "occur within the interpersonal context of a counseling relationship" (p. 470). If the client feels a positive regard and connection to his or her therapist, the clinical interventions employed are likely to be much more effective. Thus, the therapist who models empathy, forgiveness, loving identification, and functions as a co-worker in the healing process will likely have far greater benefits than the therapist who is viewing the technique alone as the solution to each malady. Specific techniques can be helpful in psychotherapy, including forgiveness techniques, but they must be viewed in the broader context of the therapeutic relationship.

Third, when forgiveness techniques are used in therapy with Christian clients, they should be considered in the context of self-awareness, empathy, humility, and insight, and not just as a way for a client to experience emotional relief. Our capacity to forgive one another depends, at least to some extent, on our capacity to understand both our need for forgiveness and God's gracious gift of forgiveness. This type of healing brings a person into a deeper relationship with God and others. Consider the case of the man who upon forgiving his alcoholic father experienced life transforming consequences (Hope, 1987). Before this act he had poor relationships and low self-esteem. He was not only harming himself, but he was also causing his family to suffer. In order for him to receive complete emotional healing, he will not only need to forgive his alcoholic father, but perhaps even more importantly, he will need to seek forgiveness from his own family for failing them. When the forgiveness process is complete, he will not only have experienced emotional healing, he will also have grown spiritually. His act will presumably bring him into a deeper relationship with God and with his family.

Fourth, it is important to recognize risks in encouraging clients to forgive too quickly or without a proper understanding of the emotional and relational affects of sin. The therapist helps the client recognize the offense, making sure that he or she does not excuse, condone, or dismiss it. In fact, he or she is supportive of the anger process and even encourages it by actively acknowledging the pain and injury. The therapist sees the undeserved consequences in the client's life, and eventually helps him or her to move beyond anger to forgiveness (Davenport, 1991). This type of presentation by the therapist helps to rebuild trust in the client. The client learns to trust again first by trusting the therapist to legitimize the undeserved anguish, but more importantly trusting that the therapist will not leave him or her in an unresolved state of bitterness and anger. Forgiveness includes risking in relationships again, often with the person who caused the injury. The therapist becomes a model who provides safety in the initial steps toward this end. This is not to suggest that reconciliation is the appropriate goal for all forms of forgive-

ness. In some situations, especially where an offender is likely to offend again, full reconciliation is not possible. In these cases the wisdom and spiritual discernment of the therapist and client are essential tools for making healthy choices.

Conclusion

Forgiveness is a powerful therapeutic tool that has a capacity to affect emotional well-being in people's lives when utilized in its proper context. But forgiveness is more than a technique. It has a theological and historical context which endows it with healing power. Forgiveness represents the end of isolation, anxiety, depravity, and brokenness, uniting humans with God and one another.

The current trend in the psychological literature is to abandon the religious significance of forgiveness so that it might be more acceptable to non-religious clients and therapists. Yet the therapist who is educated about the theological and historical bases of forgiveness can use it effectively with his or her religious and non-religious clients by becoming a therapist who models forgiveness, recognizes fallibility in the client without being condemning, presents choices and consequences around the option to forgive or to remain angry, and provides a safe and trusting environment.

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