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The Ministry of the Priesthood of Jesus Christ:

A Reformed View of the Atonement of Christ

by Andrew Purves

The priestly ministry of Jesus Christ is the heart of the doctrine of salvation. It is also almost everywhere neglected. It is the corner-stone that carries the christological (the doctrine of Christ), soteriological (the doctrine of salvation) and eschatological (the doctrine of the future hope) weight of the Gospel. We begin with a general introduction to the priestly office of Jesus Christ.

The center of Christian faith is found in the two-fold aspect of Christ's priesthood, in which through his incarnation he took on our human nature, and from within it healed it and made it holy in himself, and which he offers up to God in and through himself on our behalf. As Son of God, Christ represents God to us. He is the word of God, Emmanuel. As Son of Man, Christ represents humankind to God. He is the appropriate response to God from the body of the flesh. Christ's priesthood in this way is determined by who Christ is in the personal union of his incarnate personhood, as wholly God and wholly human, and what God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, wills in and through him that we should be and do. It is this that is fulfilled in Christ. As the "Apostle and High Priest of our confession" (Heb. 3.1), Christ, in the unity of his personhood, brings God to us and us to God in a saving work of grace that restores to us the gift of communion with God in which we discover the fullness of our humanity. In this dual action of the one work of incarnation and atonement does our Lord's priesthood consist.[1] Because of its centrality, the whole approach to the understanding of Christian faith, as well as the church and ministry, needs to be thoroughly reframed in the light of the theological testimony to the priesthood of Jesus Christ exercised through his vicarious humanity.

Two points may be noted briefly. First, the church's faith in this singular priesthood of Jesus Christ presupposes the incarnation, which in turn presupposes the doctrine of the Trinity, for it is only as God with us in a singular and unique way that Christ is also the human for God in a saving way. From beginning to end, salvation is God's work. The Gospel stands or falls, then, on the singularity of Christ's soteriological Sonship, which is, of course, the point made by the *homoousios to patri* of the Nicene Creed ('of one substance with the Father'), still the only universally accepted creed of the whole church. Second, it is because Jesus is the human for God that the incarnation becomes wholly redemptive through his active obedience in which he offers us up to God in the flesh of his own humanity through his life of worship and filial love. Here we take very seriously the teaching that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus (John 14.6). By the priestly hand of Christ alone we are presented to God. This is not only a completed past event in the body of the flesh. This offering is the continuing priestly ministry of Christ in his ascended rule at the right hand of the Father, in which he intercedes for us.

Rev. Andrew Purves, Ph.D. is Hugh Thomson Kerr Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary,

The danger for orthodoxy is likely always to lie in thinking of the incarnation itself as the whole Gospel, which undercuts Christ's ministry in our humanity in a docetic (the heresy that doesn't take Christ's humanity seriously) way.[2] When the incarnation is not thought through in terms that include the priesthood of the humanity of Christ it means, in fact, the rejection of the atonement. It is not yet salvation just that God is in communion with us, and that God has acted in Christ for us, but that we should be in communion with God. For this, Christ must, from the side of our humanity, be our High Priest, offering by his own hand vicariously our human sacrificial response to God, confessing our sin and living the filial life that God requires, so that in and through him in his priestly humanity is both the holy word of God to us and the righteous response of humankind to God. This claim for the priesthood of Jesus Christ is no doubt large and controversial, yet the actuality of the Gospel rides on the back of its truth.

The notion of the priesthood of Jesus Christ reflects a cultural mapping of experience that is far removed from much modern Western Protestant experience, especially as the priesthood of Christ is given in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and even more distantly, in its setting in the priestly and soteriological understandings and practices of biblical Israel. This is not a problem unique to this topic. The connections between ancient metaphors and modern idioms and experiences are always more or less tenuous. Further, the claim that Christ's priesthood entails the singular efficacy of his atonement strains the nerve of post-modernist inclusivism. Doubtless this strong appeal to what may appear to be an arcane, old-fashioned and unlamentedly ill-exercised biblical doctrine as the priestly ministry of Christ will strike an odd and even a wrong note in some ears, although in its defense one can cite a long and continuing tradition in Reformed dogmatics.

To begin with a few general notes. While the Gospels make no reference to the priesthood of Jesus, Christian tradition ascribes three offices to Jesus Christ—prophet, priest and king, intending to express in the unity of his person and work his identity as the Anointed One. The terms are functional and theological; they imply the person who bears them. Their inherent indirection also suggests that they have a metaphorical character. This leads us to anticipate, therefore, that they stand in both continuity and discontinuity with the Old Testament practices of prophesy, priesthood and kingship from which they are derived, as even with contemporary meanings taken from culture. In Christ these offices were not just fulfilled, but radically transformed or transcended. The offices were not just taken over by christology; neither was christology squeezed to fit into their shape. Rather, in Christ something new happened, as the old was redeployed in the service of the new reality in Jesus Christ. This is metaphorical theology at work. In this way, as T. W. Manson has noted, Christ is as prophet, both Teacher and Teaching, as priest, both Priest and Sacrifice, and as king, both Victor and Victory,[3] in a way that profoundly redefines the terms in and through his own life and ministry.

Richard Nelson has recently shown that priesthood in Israel was a complex matter that from the distant perspective of Western Christianity can at best only be understood in a partial way.[4] What is clear is that Israel's priests were both ministers of God's word and ministers of the altar of sacrifice.[5] There was a Mosaic and an Aaronic aspect that becomes one in Christ's priesthood. The priests ministered at the boundary between God and the community, between word of God and human response, bringing God to the people, and the people to God. Having access to holy space and holy tradition, priests acted both as insulators, protecting the people from God, and as connectors, mediating between the people and God, making religious life possible.[6]

In the New Testament, Christ's priesthood means above all the word of God addressing us in the incarnate flesh of Jesus of Nazareth, and the human work of Jesus Christ in response in his dealing with the Father on our behalf, as our representative before God. Like the priests of Israel, Jesus our priest stands at the boundary between God and humankind. This is what Hebrews 3.1 means when it refers to him as the Apostle and High Priest of our profession. He is in himself God's prophetic saving word toward humankind, and the perfect priestly and human obedience to that word. According to T. F. Torrance,

> As Apostle Christ bears witness for God, that He is holy. As High Priest He acknowledges that witness and says Amen to it. Again as Apostle of God He confesses the mercy and grace of God, His will to pardon and reconcile. As High Priest He intercedes for men, and confesses them before the face of God... From the side of God He acts in the steadfastness of divine truth and love in judgment, from the side of man He acts in unswerving obedience to the Father.[7]

This priestly response, of course, is in act as well as word, and its consequence is the cross, in which he bears in his body the terrible cruelty of our separation from God, and offers the self-sacrifice in which priest and victim are identical, united in his person. His *homologia* or confession of our sin as Apostle and High Priest (3.1, 4.14, 10.23) as he enters within the veil of the holiness and judgment of God, is a substitutionary atonement, an offering on our behalf in which the sinless one confesses our sin before God. This is utterly an act of God's grace and love, because Christ offers himself in unfailing obedience from and to the Father, with whom he is unbreakably linked, and in an unbreakable link with us, with whom he chose to join himself. Not only is God in Christ reconciling us to God, but also humankind is in Christ being reconciled to God in a unique and once for all union of word and action in which the Mosaic and Aaronic priesthoods of the Old Testament are united, fulfilled and transcended. Manson sums up Christ's priesthood "as his complete self-dedication in unreserved obedience to God his father and in unlimited love and compassion toward (humankind)."[8]

Martin Luther operated with the two-fold christological offices of king and priest, and went on to outline the Christian life in terms of kingship and priesthood.[9] John Calvin, in his *Institutes*, holding together the person and

work of Christ, developed the three-fold office of prophet, priest and king, in that order, although the priestly office was usually given priority in the way the offices were developed.[10] This was the framework by which he developed his christological soteriology. The emphasis is on his offices "for us,"[11] which inevitably means a priestly aspect. This was carried into Scottish theology by John Knox, where especially the priestly ministry of Christ came to shape the whole understanding of worship and ministry.[12] This Reformed use of the three-fold offices of Christ, and especially of his priestly office, as might be expected, has a biblical basis, but is best understood not as a pure biblical theology as such, but as a dogmatic conception, as a *theologoumenon,* that enables faith to grasp the person and work of Jesus in a helpful way.

The existence of the priesthood of Jesus as a significant biblical category, especially in Hebrews, 1 John 2.1f and Romans 8.34, though the whole New Testament doctrine of reconciliation depends upon it, its corollary in the royal and holy priesthood of the church in 1 Peter, and its persistence as a central christological category right up to the present day, suggests a dogmatic vitality that should not be lightly dismissed. It is quite reasonable to suggest that that which is biblical and of long-standing dogmatic usage can be critically re-appropriated and brought into service as a creative central metaphor for theology if it continues to be demanded by the objective force of the Gospel upon our minds.

In a summary way, the following three consequences arise. First, it is only on the basis of Christ's priesthood that the reconciliation between God and the world can be reclaimed as the heart of the Gospel and the center of Christian life and ministry. Reclaimed: the atonement, it has been suggested, is an abandoned doctrine in mainline Protestantism today, forced to the margins in order to make way in the main for the discussion of the Christian's moral and social responsibility.[13] The major tension that has opened up within modern Protestantism can be charted by the modernist tendency to give the prophetic ministry of Christ prominence at the expense of his priestly and royal ministries. In this way, Protestant Christianity is in process of a remarkable though reductionist redefinition as it journeys en route to the fulfillment of Kant's vision of a religion of ethical imperatives. *It has been forgotten that social ministry is the fruit of atonement and faithfulness to Christ's reign; and that salvation is not reducible to successful social ministry.*

Second, a serious theological error lies buried within this modernist reordering of the understanding of Jesus Christ and his Gospel. This has little to do with a preference for justice over atonement. In the language of the three-fold offices of Christ used especially by Calvin, it needs to be understood that participation in his prophetic and royal offices—which is a valid part of Christian discipleship—is through a sharing in his priestly office. As T. F. Torrance rightly notes, until the *parousia*, Christ "exercises His Kingdom only through His Priesthood."[14] *A sharing in Christ's royal rule through a sharing in his priesthood now means a sharing in his glory only as a sharing in his suffering servanthood.* The church on earth reigns with Christ and proclaims the word of God only as it goes the way of his cross. In this Torrance is following the teaching of an earlier Scottish theologian, William Milligan, who in 1898, wrote that "Christians are what they are by being in Christ as their Priest, by whom they draw near to God, and in whom the chief end of their being is accomplished. Knowledge of Him in that office thus precedes their full experience of Him in the other offices discharged by Him on their behalf. In the order of thought our Lord is Priest in heaven before He is Prophet or King. His prophetical and kingly offices are but the further issues of what He accomplishes as Priest."[15]

There is no possibility within our humanity of an adequate response to the word of God or the reign of God, except as Christ makes that response for us. It is Christ as our priest who stands before God as the person of faith, the Mediator given by and as God, yet standing wholly within our humanity, who proclaims and answers God's word, and who announces and lives God's reign. It is to his answering and living that we are joined, making Christian faith, life and ministry possible. This is *the* vital aspect that makes practical theology both practical and theological, yet it is often omitted today, for two reasons. On the one hand, from the side of confessional orthodoxy, it is omitted because of the tendency so to emphasize the incarnation that the corresponding Godward response of Jesus Christ goes unnoticed. On the other hand, from the side of the pluralist critics of confessionalism, it is omitted because of the reluctance to acknowledge Christ's singular Lordship as Mediator and priest.

Third, to construe Christian faith, ministry and life on any other basis than a sharing in Christ's priesthood is to cast us back upon ourselves in order to make it practical. This is a pastoral as well as a soteriological Pelagianism that arises out of an idealist theology construed as a principal, that turns Jesus into a set of ideas that we must bring to application, and which thereby is inherently abstract. Rather than our sharing by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the priesthood of Christ, and thereby to share also in his prophetic and royal ministries, we are left to our own faith and work to make a Christ-principal manifest. At the last moment this makes the Gospel no Gospel at all, for it becomes our responsibility to make actual what is otherwise only a concept. In view of what it is that the priestly office of Christ fulfils in his dealing with the Father on our behalf, the reality of Christ's work in that regard gives it a central place in practical theology.

A fundamental theological claim is made that points to the priesthood of Jesus Christ as the practical center of the Gospel, on which everything else in faith, life and ministry depend. Christ comes as the incarnate word of God who makes the response of faith, life and ministry in our place, not instrumentally in our humanity but as wholly human in a personal and vicarious manner.[16] The Gospel is not a religious idea proclaimed, or even a cosmic drama conducted 'above our heads,' as Aulen's *Christus Victor* really seems to suggest, but God's personal act in Jesus Christ by which God comes as God's word in an atoning incarnation and to which word Jesus our Brother responds. Further, the Gospel is our inclusion in the benefit of this

twofold action through a sharing in his person, not by imputation but through relationship with Christ, in union with Christ. It is this dual movement in and through the hypostatic union (union of two natures in one person in doctrine of Christ) of the one person of Jesus Christ that forces us to think soteriologically about the incarnation, and relationally about soteriology, so to understand our salvation not only in terms of the act of God in Christ that deals with our sins, but also in terms of the act of God in Christ that offers to God from the side of our humanity the life of satisfaction through the worship and service that God desires, which is the life of communion with God. There is no Gospel for us, no atonement that brings us into communion with God and allows us to worship and serve God as God desires, without both the worldward and Godward movements of God in Christ, in which there is both a real and not just an apparent incarnation, and a worthy and acceptable response to God out of the heart and in the flesh of our humanity to which we are joined. In particular, there is no Gospel at the point where we are called to worship and serve God, without the vicarious humanity of Our Lord in and through which he gives to the Father the life of worship and service in which we, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, are blessed to participate. Without the priestly ministry of Jesus Christ in the body of the flesh there is no possibility for the faithful response to God from the side of humanity that God desires, and the Gospel is cut off from us at just that place where we are required by God to respond with worship and service.

The Gospel has to overcome not only our sin unto death but also our inability to offer to God the worship and service that God rightly commands. This is not merely moral and technical incompetence to be overcome by renewed effort. Neither is it a question of our becoming more religious. It is a mistake too to offer an account of the agency of the Holy Spirit at just this point when that means bypassing the vicarious priesthood of Christ. *Christian faith teaches that between God and ourselves stands the need for an atonement, not only as the means of dealing with sin, guilt and death, but also as the means of our return to relationship with God and service of God, to life in communion with God.* Too often, a theology of atonement has attended to the former without attending also to the latter, leaving us still to our own devices, whether in faith looking for the fruits of sanctification in order to have assurance, or in life and ministry looking to the success of our best efforts in order to have confidence that our work is blessed by God. The effect is to throw us back upon ourselves at the last moment, leaving both faith and ministry to be worked out in terms of our own response, with no role for Jesus Christ at just that point where we need him most with respect to the practice of faith and ministry. This is a drastic and ultimately fatal abridgement of the Gospel.

The priesthood of Christ is a theological metaphor that points in a decidedly non-literal yet Godly way to the meaning of our baptismal incorporation into Christ. It lifts us out of concern for our role in the management of salvation—often reducible to a dull causality—into the mystery of our adoption as children of God through our incorporation into Christ and our union with Christ. It presents itself on its own terms as the practical center of Christian faith, as that in which faith hopes, on which faith depends, and that makes faith possible in the first place. There is a sense, therefore, in which the priesthood of Christ is everything.

There are three important conclusions. First, Christ's substitution is not just an act done for us two thousand years ago. Always standing as our Mediator, in his substitutionary priestly office he continues to be the One who stands between God and humankind, setting aside our obedience, worship and service, which always remain deeply inadequate, offering his own in our place. This soteriological displacement must be worked out in a thoroughgoing way. Second, he continually prays for us, interceding with the Father on our behalf (Heb. 6.20, 7.25-28, 8.1-6). He takes our prayer, for we do not know how to pray (Rom 8.26), and perfects it in himself, giving us his prayer in a 'wonderful exchange.'[17] Third, he sends us the Holy Spirit to join us to his worship and service, making us a royal priesthood, worshipping and serving God in and through Jesus Christ, to the glory of the Father. His priesthood becomes our priesthood by grace, and this is the theological basis for ecclesiology, in general, and for pastoral care, in particular. In the dispensation of the church, baptism is the sacrament of our substitution in which we die and rise with Christ, and thus is only administered once; the Lord's Supper is the sacrament of our sharing in his continuing life, and thus is to be celebrated whenever the people of the Body gather. These words of John McLeod Cambell sum up the consequence: "Therefore Christ, as the Lord of our spirits and our life, *devotes us to God* and *devotes us to men* in the *fellowship of his self-sacrifice*."[18]

The priesthood of Christ takes us into the center of the Gospel, not only at the point of atonement for sin, but also at the point of our sharing in the fellowship of Christ's self-sacrifice, which is the sum of Christian life and ministry. It is Christ's priestly ministry that enables us to hold salvation and discipleship together *as Gospel.* The great danger is always that at the last moment Gospel becomes its opposite, in which everything depends upon us—our faith, our decisions or works exercised as in a legal or commercial transaction. God in Christ acts in a two-fold way in the flesh of our humanity as our atoning priest, bringing God to us and us to God, to bridge the gulf which separated between what sin had made us, and what it was the desire of God's love that we should become. The redemption of us who stand condemned in our sins is only truly and fully seen in its relation to the results contemplated, namely, our participation in eternal life through our adoption as children of God.

Christ has consecrated a way into the holy company of God through the purification of his blood enabling us, in the name of Christ, not only to worship God in truth but to draw near to God, crying, "Abba, Father." We come to God only as God's children, or not at all, and that alone in the power of the priestly Sonship of Jesus Christ, in his revealing of the Father as our Father, and in his offering of us in his own humanity to share in his divine Sonship.

Deeply influencing this conclusion are two vital aspects of Calvin's theology: union with Christ and the wonderful exchange. The two concepts interpret one another. Christ, who has joined himself to us in his incarnation, joins us to himself through the Spirit, and by his continuing priestly intercession for us, makes us to share in his filial communion with the Father, effecting a wonderful exchange, a glorious substitution, taking to himself our sin, enmity and death, giving us what is his, his righteousness, love and eternal life, in sum, leading us to pray with Christ, "Our Father, who art in heaven..." This is salvation.

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[1].For standard accounts see James B. Torrance, "The Priesthood of Jesus: A Study in the Doctrine of the Atonement," in T. H. L. Parker (ed.), Essays in Christology for Karl Barth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956); James B. Torrance, Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), pp. 32 - 57; and T. F. Torrance, Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry, second edition, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), pp. 1-22.

[2].John McLeod Campbell makes this claim, recognizing its roots to lie in the deep sense of human religiosity and of our preciousness before God. See The Nature of the Atonement, (Edinburgh: The Hansel Press and Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans, 1996, first published by Cambridge: MacMillan, 1856), p. 21. McLeod Campbell's theology has deeply influenced what is here written.

[3].T. W. Manson, Ministry and Priesthood: Christ's and Ours (Richmond, VA.: John Knox Press, 1958), p.31.

[4].Richard D. Nelson, Raising Up A Faithful Priest: Community, Priesthood and Biblical Theology (Louisville: W/JKP, 1993).

[5].Ibid., p. 46.

[6].Ibid., p. 85.

[7].T. F. Torrance, Royal Priesthood, p. 12, and throughout chapter 1 for what follows.

[8].Manson, Ibid., p. 63.

[9].Martin Luther, "A Treatise on Christian Liberty," in Works of Martin Luther Vol. II (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1915).

[10].T. F. Torrance, Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), p. 246, n. 93.

[11].Calvin, Institutes, 2.15. Because the soteriology of the church made use of the priestly and kingly offices, a two-fold office was more common in the theology of the church up to the Reformation. It was not until Calvin and the Geneva Catechism that the full doctrine of the three-fold office was generally accepted. See Otto Weber, Foundations of Dogmatics, Vol 2,tr. Darrell Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983). p. 172 f.

[12].See Torrance, Scottish Theology, p. 25 f.

[13].See Colin Grant, "The Abandonment of Atonement," King's Theological Review 9, pp. 1-8. Cited by Colin Gunton, The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and Christian Tradition (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. xi.

[14].T. F. Torrance, Royal Priesthood, p. 61.

[15].William Milligan, The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of Our Lord (London: Macmillan and Co., 1898), p. 62 - 63.

[16]. "In this event atonement is not an act of God done *ab extra* upon man, but an act of God become man, done *ab intra*, in his stead and on his behalf; it is an act of God as man, translated into human actuality and made to issue out of the depths of man's being and life toward God." T. F. Torrance, The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), p. 158 -9.

[17].J. Calvin, Institutes, IV. 17. 2. See also J. B. Torrance, Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), p. 35.

[18].McLeod Campbell, The Nature of the Atonement, p. 255. For a contemporary development see J. B. Torrance, Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace. This dual theme of forgiveness and renewal was already expressed in Scottish theology in *John Knox's Liturgy*: "I confess that Jesus Christ did not only justify us by covering all our faults and iniquities, but also renews us by his Spirit and that these two points can not be separate, to obtain pardon for our sins, and to be reformed into a holy life." Cited in Torrance, Scottish Theology, op. cit., p 20.

Violence, Abuse and the Reformed Understanding of the Atonement

by Richard J. Mouw

It is not uncommon these days for scholars to criticize traditional Christian doctrines for the ways in which they purportedly promote and reinforce unhealthy social practices. Someone will reject the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, for example, not on the grounds that it is "unscientific" to believe in a miracle of that sort, but because it promotes an image of passive and servile femininity. Or the idea of divine transcendence will be attacked for the way in which it reinforces "hierarchicalism" in human relationships.

One topic that has come in for special attention in this regard is the atoning work of Christ. The suggestion is made that the idea of a father punishing his son, as it is incorporated into the ways in which traditional theologians have thought about the work of the Cross, features imagery that promotes abusive relationships among human beings. Obviously, such a critique is directed toward a theme that is central to orthodox Reformed teachings. It is important to

Rev. Richard Mouw, Ph.D. is President of Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA

think carefully about this way of dealing with theological issues.

How would we go about deciding whether a Reformed view of the atonement actually "promotes" violence and abuse? I have a pretty good idea, I think, about how I would decide whether, for example, Mennonite views of the atonement promote violence and abuse. As I read many Mennonite theologians I regularly find them formulating their understandings of the atoning work of Christ in such a way as to rule out any espousal of violence and abuse. The Cross is, according to the Mennonite thinkers that I read, a paradigmatic display of non-violence. To understand the atoning work of Christ properly is, in a very direct way for them, to adopt specific views about the fundamental impropriety of any Christian involvement in practices of violence and abuse.

I also think I could come up with an intelligent response to the question whether Roman Catholic theologies of the atonement promote violence and abuse. I have read newspaper articles during Holy Week about Catholics in the Philippines who have themselves nailed to crosses. These seem to me clearly to be acts of self-inflicted violence and abuse. Furthermore, they also seem to be directly linked to the ways in which these Catholics think about the atoning work of Christ. Of course, I know enough about Catholic soteriology to know that such practices are not advocated by Catholic academic theologians. But I do think one could make a case that there are motifs in Catholic thought that lend themselves to such acts, even if they are distortions of those motifs. Self-crucifixion, along with, say, the valuing of *stigmata*, certainly makes more sense in a context shaped by Catholic theology than it would in, say, a Lutheran or a Quaker setting.

Now, my initial instinct is to say that Reformed views of the atonement do not connect with issues of violence and abuse in either of these ways. That is, I am tempted to point to the fact that Reformed thinkers do not typically say, in the manner of Mennonite thinkers, that because of what happened on the Cross our attitudes toward violence and abuse ought to be such and such. And I am also tempted to argue that it is difficult to find—as we do in some manifestations of Catholicism—popular Calvinism engaging in violent and abusive practices that are in some sense shaped by theological motifs—even distorted theological motifs—with regard to the atonement.

But I know that I cannot finesse the issues in that manner. Certainly my Mennonite friends will not allow me to get away with such an easy disclaimer. They might well insist that my Reformed view of the Cross also deals with issues of violence and abuse in a paradigmatic manner. If it is true, as traditional Reformed theology has put it, that the transaction of the Cross necessarily involved Jesus being punished by the Father for our sins, then Reformed soteriology does indeed insist that violence and/or abuse is an essential feature of the atoning sacrifice of Christ—an insistence, they might go on to point out, that has clear implications for Christian attitudes towards questions regarding the permissability of violent activity. And any Catholic who knows the history of popular Reformed attitudes regarding violence might rightly suggest that it is not fair to contrast "high" Calvinism with "low" Catholicism. Reformed Christians have often been militantly violent—and in such a way that their violence has been grounded in a context shaped by Reformed motifs.

I think that each of these responses is helpful in clarifying the issue. In reflecting on the ways in which Reformed views about the atonement might actually promote violence and abuse, I am prepared to concede both that the Reformed way of understanding the work of the Cross does have implications for our perspectives on violence and abuse, and that popular Calvinism has often encouraged violent and abusive practices in a way that has been shaped by the Calvinist way of thinking about God's dealing with humankind. I do want to suggest, however, that it does not follow from these concessions that Reformed views about the atonement promote violence and abuse. Let me explain this first of all with regard to the latter concession regarding the violent attitudes often associated with popular Calvinism.

Calvinists have often not been very nice people. They have been intolerant, often to the point of abusive and violent actions toward people with whom they have disagreed. The record of Calvinism in its treatment of the Anabaptists is an obvious case in point in this regard. I think we must also acknowledge abusive practices in family contexts. Calvinist husbands and fathers have often been unspeakably cruel to their wives and daughters—this fact has been well documented for example, in a recent empirical study of the topic commissioned by the Christian Reformed Church.[1]

It is important to ask, though, whether these practices are in some sense "promoted" by Reformed understandings of the atonement. It would be interesting to find out, for example, whether, say, Old Amish fathers and husbands have also often abused their wives and daughters. If so, we might have to explore the possibility that abusive practices occur in theologically shaped cultures in spite of what those cultures might teach regarding the implications of a theory of the atonement with regard to violence and abuse. My own sense is that the attitudes toward violence and abuse in popular Calvinism have more to do with a more general picture of a God who has often been experienced as a very "distant" male authority figure—and one who is seen as being fundamentally and unalterably angry, from all eternity, with an identifiable subgroup of the human race—than it has to do with anything specifically associated with the work of the Cross. Indeed, my own theological prescription would be to appeal to the doctrine of the atonement as an antidote to this distorted view of the divine personality, by bringing the general motifs of a Reformed psychology of the divine mood and disposition into line with a very central emphasis on the work of the Cross.

But, then, what about the seemingly violent-abusive themes contained within the Reformed view about the Cross itself? Doesn't the Reformed perspective view punishment as an essential feature of the atoning work of Christ? I think it does. It is difficult to avoid the sense that the teaching that Christ in some important sense suffered the divine wrath

against sin is a non-negotiable component of the Reformed view; this theme is repeated consistently in the confessional formulations: for example, in the Heidelberg, the Scots Confession, Westminster, the Second Helvetic, and the 1967 Confession.

But the real question is: does this Reformed view *promote* violence and abuse in human relations? I think not, and I offer two considerations in support of this contention.

First, it is important to recognize the significant link between the Reformed perspective on the atonement and Reformed tradition's ethical teachings regarding the use of violence. We often refer to this as our Calvinist version of "just war" doctrine, but the scope of Reformed teaching in this area is not strictly speaking limited to military activity. The doctrine really has to do with an understanding of the use of violence as such: on the Reformed view, violent activities are permitted only with specific moral boundaries. As John Howard Yoder has argued, just war teaching originated, not in an argument with pacifists, but out of a desire to place moral limits on the use of violence as over against the unbridled militarism of pagan cultures[2]—and I am convinced that the Reformed version of the teaching fits this pattern.

In any event, this much seems clear: the Reformed tradition has insisted that violence is permissible only if certain moral guidelines are in effect. And it is interesting and important to think about how these guidelines apply to, say, questions regarding domestic violence. In the *Institutes* Calvin warns magistrates that when they are considering a military venture, they ought not to give "vent to their passions even in the slightest degree." Let them not, he says, "be carried away with headlong anger, or be seized with hatred, or burn with implacable severity"; indeed, it is necessary that they cultivate "pity on the common [human] nature in the one" whom they are thinking about attacking (4.20.12).

To the degree that the transaction that took place on the Cross does contain some element of violence, we should expect that it would conform to the kinds of moral criteria associated with the more general Reformed teaching regarding the proper use of violence. And my clear impression is that it does so conform. God is seen as engaging in a "last resort" remedy for the ravages of human depravity; the punishment is proportionate to the end being sought, and so on. Furthermore, God is not being carried away by the kinds of illicit passions against which Calvin warns. There seems to be nothing here, then, that would "promote" the kind of gratuitous abusive behavior that is associated with, for example, domestic violence.

Second, it is also helpful to attend here to the important Reformed emphasis on the "once-for-all" character of the atoning work of Christ. My own sense is that as a general rule Calvinists have not been very attracted to "imitation of Christ" type spiritual or ethical motifs. This certainly seems to be true with respect to any notion of specifically imitating the work of the Cross. The Calvinist pattern here stands in stark contrast to both the Mennonite and Catholic examples that I mentioned earlier. Calvinists are not inclined to see the helplessness element of Christ's atoning work as a thing to be imitated—Calvinism has seldom erred in the direction of encouraging a "victim" mentality in its adherents. Nor have Reformed Christians exhibited any obvious fascination with stigmata or other crucifixion-type manifestations in the Christian life.

The once-for-all theme in the Reformed understanding of the atonement suggests that *even if* there was an element of the kind of violence on the Cross that, if it were to show up in human relationships, would be deemed highly abusive, there is no reason to think that Calvinists would be quick to pick up on that imitative possibility. When Calvinists have been abusive, I suggest, they have taken whatever theological cues that have motivated them from some other area of Reformed thought than the theory of the atonement.

In making these two points I mean to be engaging in a kind of soteriological apologetics. Against the possible charge that Reformed views of the atonement promote morally reprehensible acts of violence and abuse I suggest that these two factors serve as theological safeguards against such a connection. Reformed thought has insisted that violence must take place within strict moral limits, and it has generally not fostered a notion that the Cross is a reference point for our imitative activity.

Again, this is not to deny real patterns of Calvinist abusiveness. Nor is it to rule out the possibility that some depraved Calvinists have so twisted their understanding of the work of the Cross that they have in fact made a connection between what God did to accomplish our redemption and what we must do to accomplish our own perverted aims. But I do not think that in such cases the fault lies with Reformed views of the atonement. Indeed, I am convinced that a proper understanding of those views provides us with significant spiritual and moral resources for combatting such abusive behaviors.

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[1]This research is discussed by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen et al., in *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993).

[2]John Howard Yoder, *When War is Unjust: Being Honest in Just-War Thinking* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1984).

The Judgment of Grace:

Forgiveness in Christian Life

by L. Gregory Jones

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The psychiatrist Robert Coles tells of a friend, a devout Roman Catholic, who was hospitalized with cancer.[1] On one of Coles's visits to the hospital he found his friend quite angry. A priest had recently been to visit the friend. The priest wanted to know how the patient was managing to "cope." He proceeded in what Coles calls a "relentless a kind of psychological inquiry." How was the patient "feeling"? How was he "managing," in view of the "stress" he had to "confront"? The friend was enraged by such questions, for he wanted to talk with the priest about God and His ways, about Christ's life and death, about the Gospel of Luke (a particular favorite) about Heaven and Hell—only to be approached repeatedly with psychological words and phrases. As the friend characterized it to Coles: "He comes here with a Roman collar, and offers me psychological banalities as God's word!"

The friend commented that he was prepared for the priest's next visit. Among other things, he was going to ask the priest to read Psalm 69. Coles cites one part of that Psalm: "Save me, O God; for the waters are come into my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing I am come into deprivation, where the floods overflow me." Coles concludes by commenting "There are, of course, many kinds of burdens in this life. I wonder whether the deepest mire, the deepest waters, for many of America's clergy, not to mention us laymen, may be found in the dreary solipsistic world so many of us have learned to find so interesting; the mind's moods, the various 'stages' and 'phases' of 'human development' or of 'dying,' all dwelt upon (God save us!) as if Stations of the Cross."

When a *psychiatrist* criticizes our culture, and particularly our church, for becoming overly therapeutic and solipsistic, there is legitimate cause for concern. Such language helps to suggest, I think what would otherwise be a rather odd circumstance: a Christian theologian suggesting that we need to reassess the place of forgiveness within Christian theology and Christian life. For, after all, if there is any topic that seems assured not only of a place, but of a central place, in Christian theology, it would be forgiveness. It is a prominent theme in Jesus' life and the New Testament more generally; it is part of both the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed; it is understood to be a crucial dimension of both baptism and eucharist; and it raises crucial issues about the relationships among doctrines of God, Christ, the Church, and ethics and politics.

Yet Cole's story reveals the dominance of non-theological modes of thinking and acting. These modes have become deeply embedded in too much "Christian" discourse, and particularly in our conceptions of forgiveness. Hence in this essay I will argue that we need to reclaim the centrality of theological language for Christian faith and life, specifically by examining one set of issues surrounding a Christian account of forgiveness.

The essay moves through four stages: 1) I will identify problems that have emerged in contemporary conceptions of Christian forgiveness 2) I will contend that God's forgiveness reflects the judgment of grace, enabling us to live a new life as forgiven and forgiving people; 3) I will show how God's forgiveness enables Christians to engage in practices of forgiveness and reconciliation, practices whose *telos* is holiness and 4) I will suggest that there may be times where "loving enemies" is as far as we can move on the path of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Problems With Forgiveness In Modernity

I want to identify four particular problems that have impoverished our contemporary understandings and practices of forgiveness. First, most generally, forgiveness has become an increasingly marginal notion in Western culture and intellectual life. Modernity's emphasis on such themes as individual autonomy, acts rather than character, inevitable progress, and the fascination of technique have all helped to marginalize conceptions of forgiveness and/or to undermine practices of forgiveness.

If all that matters is individual autonomy, then forgiveness and reconciliation—which are designed to foster and maintain community—are of little importance. If all that we evaluate are acts rather than people's character, then forgiveness—which reflects a quality of character and thus cannot be confined to an "act" that people do—is relatively insignificant. If we are on a path of inevitable progress, then there is little need—as forgiveness requires—to reflect on, and attempt to rehabilitate, the past. If what ultimately matters is the successful use of technique, then we will only deploy forgiveness if it is useful to further control and technical mastery.

Hence there are cultural reasons why forgiveness has been marginalized in contemporary thought and life. Even so,

L. Gregory Jones Ph.D., Department of Theology, Loyola College, Baltimore, MD

Christians cannot simply blame the Enlightenment or modernity for our contemporary predicament. A primary reason for forgiveness's marginalization in modernity is Christianity's ambiguous legacy. This is the second problem that has impoverished our understandings and practices of forgiveness.

Christianity's ambiguous legacy is the result of transformations within our own conceptions and practices. Forgiveness is theologically crucial for both the people of Israel and the early Christians. Indeed, for the early Christians, crucial to the "grammar" of forgiveness is a set of communal practices necessary for rightly characterizing, and witnessing to, the eschatological salvation wrought by the Triune God.

But as Christianity increasingly distances itself from its Jewish roots and becomes the established religion in the fourth century, forgiveness begins to take a different shape. While I cannot in any sense do justice to the complex social and historical factors leading to these different shapes, it is none the less important to note that conceptions of forgiveness have been significantly altered. For example, the confession of sin which was in its origins primarily—though not exclusively—a communal practice, has moved from the community to individualized and increasingly privatized context. Further, Christian piety has turned increasingly inward. God's forgiveness has become understood principally as an individual transaction between God and a particular person, largely devoid of its eschatological context and with virtually no consequences for either Christian community or social and political life.

Hence in contemporary Christian theology and life, while the rhetoric of forgiveness remains a part of our worship, the conceptions and practices of forgiveness have been radically transmuted. Such transmutations have helped to contribute to the separation of Christology from theology, ecclesiology, and ethics. Thus Christianity's own ambiguous legacy has helped to marginalize the significance of forgiveness.

A third problem, one explicitly noted by Coles, is that we Christians have increasingly secularized our own language. Outside of the contexts of worship (and sometimes even within worship), we have tended to adopt non-theological language to describe Christian theology and Christian life. For example, instead of baptism, we talk of "christening" or even of "getting the baby done." Instead of sin and grace, we talk about "accepting that you are accepted." And instead of practices of reconciliation, we talk about "managing conflict" or "coping with difficult people." Indeed it would seem as if Christians—including lay people, clergy, and theologians—have become immunized against the use of theological language for characterizing our lives in general, and forgiveness in particular.

Unfortunately, such immunization against theological language has not also been effective against "therapeutic" language. Thus a fourth problem with conceptions of forgiveness is that the grammar of Christian forgiveness has been largely coopted by a therapeutic grammar. Theodore Jennings has characterized our culture as being caught by "mental health moralism and therapeutic narcissism."[2] When forgiveness is seen primarily in individualistic and privatistic terms, we lose sight of its central role in establishing a way of life *not only* with our "inner" selves *but also* in our relations with others.

This contrast may seem to be only a matter of emphasis, with "therapeutic" language emphasizing the *intra*personal dimension and what I have been calling "theological" language the *inter*personal dimension. Both of them, it might be argued, are theological in that they are ultimately concerned with right relation to God. Further, the argument might continue by rightly emphasizing that Christian forgiveness needs to be attentive to, and in dialogue with, psychological and psychoanalytic concerns if people are to become holy. If degrees of emphasis were the only, or even the primary, issue, then there would hardly be cause for alarm or even concern.

But "therapeutic" language has increasingly distorted the grammar of Christian forgiveness. Despite the overlaps between "therapeutic" and "Christian" forgiveness, there are crucial differences. For example, Robert C. Roberts, in a critical assessment of Lewis Smedes's *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* makes the following observation:

> It is hard to imagine Saint Paul exhorting his readers to forgive one another 'for each of you has a right to be healed of your hate.' It is typical of him to tell them to forgive one another because Christ has forgiven them and in doing so they will be like Christ, or for the sake of harmony in the church, or because in forgiving one another we will become fit for the kingdom of God or ready for the judgment day. In other words, when asked for a rationale for forgiveness, Paul does not speak in *therapeutic* terms, but instead in terms of what *is fitting*, given certain beliefs about the history of God's actions, the character and actions of Jesus, the nature of the church and the coming kingdom.[3]

Further, Roberts criticizes Smedes's therapeutic conception because it endorses forgiving *God* if, by so doing, we are enabled to find peace and heal ourselves. By contrast, within the grammar of Christian forgiveness, it makes no sense to speak of "forgiving God" because God is not blameworthy.

Roberts' starkest contrast is established by a quotation from Smedes's argument. Smedes contends that

> As we forgive people, we gradually come to see the deeper truth about them, a truth our hate blinds us to, a truth we can see only when we separate them from what they did to us... For the truth about those who hurt us is that they are weak, needy and fallible human beings... They are not *only* people who hurt us; this is not the deepest truth about them.[4]

In response, Roberts insists that

> In the Christian view, the deepest truth about every offender is not that he or she is a 'weak, needy, and

> fallible human being' but that he or she is a forgiven sinner, one for whom Christ died. And not this only, but that he or she is one for whom, *along with me*, Christ died. We are in a common predicament. In God's sight we are in need of being died for, and because Christ did so we are adopted daughters or sons. That the forgiven one is a child of God, in cosmic community with the forgiver, is what is 'seen' by the person who most deeply experiences offering Christian forgiveness.[5]

In this light, we will only adequately understand why Christians care about forgiveness if we remove it from its "therapeutic" context and relocate it within the larger doctrinal claims of Christian faith and life.

The Judgment Of Grace

Therapeutic language about forgiveness, grounded in the healing of hatred, encourages the abdication of judgment. In reaction against a harsh judgmentalism which many people have experienced (and which, to be sure, has caused much bitterness and broken relationships), it is suggested that we need to emphasize *not* judging others—just live and let live. Often Jesus' words in Matthew 7:1 are invoked: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judge."

But this misses the point of Matthew 7:1, as I will suggest further below. More importantly, and more to the point, such a view distorts the logic of God's forgiveness that is focused in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the ministry and cross of Christ, we are judged in our sinfulness. There is no getting around that. But God's judgment of our lives comes as a judgment that does not condemn. As the resurrection of the crucified testifies, God's judgment is a forgiving grace which requires us—and enables us—to confront our histories of sin, desertion, and betrayal so that we are set free for a new future with God and the others in the new eschatological community (see Acts 4:10-12, John 20-21).[6]

There is a great deal packed in to the last paragraph, more than can be adequately unpacked in this context. But I want to spell out a bit further some implications of that paragraph, implications that will help to illumine the nature of God's forgiveness. We need to recognize that God's forgiveness does not come apart from an acknowledgment of, and confrontation with, human sin and evil. God does not simply "overlook" or "ignore" our destructiveness. If that were the case, then there would be no need for Christ's death. Rather, God confronts sin and evil in all of its awfulness. In so doing, God exposes our wounds, both those which have been inflicted upon us and those we have inflicted on others. There clearly is a judgment in God's work in Jesus Christ.

However, God's confrontation with sin and evil is *not* for the purpose of condemning us. Indeed, it is for the explicit purpose of forgiving us and healing our—and the world's—wounds. It is a judgment *of grace*. As Karl Barth has suggested:

> The judgment of the grace of God fulfilled there [i.e., the cross] was the work of God which could be fulfilled and was fulfilled only by Him. So, too, it is with the emergence here [i.e., the resurrection] of the grace of this judgment, the grace which as such does not cancel or encroach upon this judgment but leaves it behind as its presupposition, its first work.[7]

There is nothing we can do to *earn* God's forgiveness, God's healing. It has been accomplished *extra nos* through the slaying and raising of Christ. Thus forgiveness and healing come to us as a free gift of grace. It is in this sense that we rightly speak of God's *un*conditional forgiveness and healing as signs of God's Kingdom.

Even so, while there are no conditions for God forgiving us, repentance is crucial for us to receive that forgiveness. That is to say, God's forgiveness becomes audible to us as we learn to see both the reality of the world under judgment and our participation in that fallenness. As Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it, "God forgives through free grace not on the basis of acts of penance, but. . . this forgiveness cannot become effective unless there is an expiatory conversion of the person."[8] Our conversion comes about as we recognize that we can confront our past, understood both in personal and social/cosmic terms, because we are no longer in bondage to it. We have been judged, and thus we acknowledge our sinfulness; but that judgment is wholly in the service of grace, healing and, as I will suggest below, holiness.

Judgment is important, because no matter how much we may try to forget the past and our history of sinfulness, unconfronted sin and bitterness find ways to influence our lives. That is why I think it is largely a mistake to say "forgive and forget." Rather, the judgment of grace enables us, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to remember well. When God promises to "blot out [Israel's] transgressions" and "not remember Israel's sins" (Isaiah 43:25; see also Jeremiah 31:34), God is not simply letting "bygones be bygones." Rather, God is testifying to God's own gracious faithfulness. Moreover, such forgiveness provides a way to narrate the history of Israel's sinfulness within the context of God's covenant of grace. Such a narration makes it possible to forget the sin, to be sure, but to remember the past so that a new and renewed future becomes possible.

All of this suggests that the fundamental orientation of Christian life is that we are forgiven. As Stanley Hauerwas has suggested, more important than our learning to forgive is our learning to be forgiven. [9] We cannot trade on our ability to forgive, or on our own self-righteousness and power. We must have an ironic relationship to our own acts of forgiving recognizing the prior need for us always to examine the ways in which we need to be forgiven. We are, fundamentally, people who are forgiven sinners. Such a posture takes us out of the realm of domination and control, enabling us to forgive because we have been forgiven.

This is a reminder that forgiveness inevitably involves power and the dynamics of power-relations. The granting or withholding of forgiveness entails an exercise of power; but if the understanding of forgiveness begins with an

acknowledgment that we are all equally in *need* of God's forgiveness, then this alters the dynamics of power and creates new possibilities for community. As Rowan Williams has characterized the importance of learning to be forgiven:

> So to live a 'forgiven' life is not simply to live in a happy consciousness of being absolved. Forgiveness is precisely the deep and abiding sense of what relation—with God or with other human beings—can and should be; and so it is itself a stimulus, an irritant, necessarily provoking protest at impoverished versions of social and personal relations. Once we grasp that forgiveness occurs not by a word of acquittal but by a transformation of the world of persons, we are not likely to regard it as something which merely refers backwards. [10]

Forgiveness provides a new context for us to understand our lives in relation to God and each other, and also to discern more clearly God's purposes from Creation to the promised eschatological consummation of that Creation.

The perspective I have been developing helps explain what is going on in Matthew 7:1. As the verses immediately following indicate, and as can also be gleaned from a reading of the whole Gospel (see particularly Mt. 18:15-20, about which more below), this text does not encourage the abdication of judgment. Indeed the avoidance of judgment reflects a lack of love and commitment. Rather, this passage reflects the destructiveness of a judgment—we might more appropriately call it being judgmental—which presumes to judge from a standpoint where the judge does not also think he or she either has been, or needs to be, judged. In such cases, judgment becomes the occasion for a self-possessive exercise of power. Rather, what the Gospel commends is that we learn that we are forgiven; and from that standpoint, judgment becomes an occasion for God's grace.

Even so, we need to explore in a bit more detail the logic of God's forgiveness. I have suggested that there are no conditions for God's forgiveness, but that in order to appropriate that forgiveness we need to confess, repent, and learn to live as forgiven and forgiving people. If this is the case, what are the implications for the shape of Christian community and Christian life? That is to say, how are these christological claims linked to concerns within ecclesiology, ethics and politics?

Practices Of Forgiveness And Reconciliation

In response to God's forgiveness, we are to engage in practices of forgiveness and reconciliation in Christian community. That is central to being the body of Christ. As the writer to the Ephesians puts it, "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 4:31-5:2, NRSV).

That should come as no surprise. The central sacraments of the Christian church, baptism and eucharist,[11] provide a similar context for reflecting both the decisive act of God's forgiveness in Christ and the correlative implication that we ought to live in Christian community as a baptismal and eucharistic people.[12] But what, more exactly, does that mean?

There is, to be sure, an asymmetry between God's forgiveness and our own. We are not called to *be* Christ, but to be *like* Christ. We are to manifest God's forgiveness of each of us, accomplished in Jesus Christ, in and through our relations with one another by the power of the Holy Spirit. In order to do so, we need to engage in the disciplines of Christian community that teach us, and train us, so that we can be transformed into people who not only are forgiven and forgive, but as people whose very lives are marked by forgiven-ness and are thus enabled for a new life of friendship with God and with others in the community judged, guided, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Rowan Williams nicely makes the point about the importance of Christian community in his discussion of a passage in Teresa of Avila's thought.

> So being able to forgive slights and injuries is a byproduct of that life of the kingdom of heaven which Carmel attempts to manifest. Becoming accustomed to the life of the kingdom is difficult, and it is perhaps because of this that Christ promises forgiveness to the forgiving, not to those who excel in outward observance: what matters in Carmel, what assures the sisters of mercy, is not observance or sacrifice or devotion but simply being a community of friendship (36.7). We are left with the suggestive paradox that forgiving is no great matter, as an event in itself—but becoming a forgiving person, through the disciplines of community, is.[13]

Such disciplines of community have as their *telos* not simply the righting of wrongs, but the cultivation of holiness both in the lives of individuals and as a community—all through the power of God's Spirit.

That is, the grace of God's forgiveness also makes possible new and renewed lives of holiness, Such is the process of living into our baptism, of living into our vocation as eucharistic people. God's forgiveness transfigures us so that we are no longer bound to the destructive patterns of the past; rather, we are enabled by God to remember the past so that we can be freed for new life in faithful witness to God's inbreaking Kingdom.

We become holy in the process of living lives of forgiven-ness, and hence also forgiving-ness. We are called to be holy not as some form of superhuman exercise of moral strength, but as a reflection of our gratitude for God's forgiveness. We are not required to change *in order to be* forgiven by God; there is nothing we can do to earn that forgiveness. Rather, we are enabled by God to change and grow *because we have been* forgiven.

This is the reason why confession is such an important practice for Christians, and why it is so easily misunderstood. We are called to confess our sin to God and before one another in Christian community *not* in order to earn God's forgiveness, or even in order to make ourselves worthy of God's forgiveness. Nor do we confess simply to weigh ourselves down with the burden of sin and a self-denying humiliation.

Rather, we are enabled to confess in order to re-narrate our lives so that we are capable of appropriating God's forgiveness into our lives as forgiven and forgiving people in community. Thus confession is not a means of earning salvation; it is a discipline of community which, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, makes possible, and contributes to, our transformation into holy people. As the literary critic Frank Lentricchia has described it in a recent essay:

> Bless me, father, for I have sinned. Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins. The pains of Hell. When I was less than a teenager confession was coming out of church on a late Saturday afternoon having made a perfect Act of Contrition and having done my penance without a grudge and knowing with complete joy that should I be struck and killed by an automobile before I reached home I would go directly to Heaven, because God would find my soul beautiful. Now, at fifty, I think confession is telling who you are to someone who will not judge you a failure because you fail. To confess, to periodically relinquish privacy, to renounce solitude as an end in itself. It seemed a rehearsal for friendship; a discipline for community.[14]

Confession is thus taking responsibility for one's own life and one's own action. Even more strongly, it includes not only affirming our created goodness but also taking responsibility for our part in the judgment under which the world stands. In so doing, our selves are re-made so that we are capable of engaging in practices of forgiveness that foster holiness and re-create relationships—with God (in response to God's prior forgiveness of us), with one another, and with ourselves.[15]

Confession and forgiveness thus are crucial practices which are integrally joined to other practices such as baptism and eucharist. These practices enable us both to sustain community and to witness to an alternative form of power—the power of Christ's cross and resurrection. Such power does not destroy, but seeks to reconcile and make new. As Nicholas Lash suggests, we need an

> appropriate engagement with destructive violence, the strenuous exercise of a kind of power set to the service of a kind of politics, construction of the kind of culture of reconciliation and the binding up of wounds which might embody, sustain, and publicly communicate the announcement of God's peace.[16]

Hence a Christian theology which manifests the crucial links among Christology, ecclesiology, and Christian life will also have strong implications for ethics and politics. Such links are forged by God's forgiveness and strengthened by the vocation of holiness, that call to saintly living wherein we can absorb sin and evil without passing them on.

Even so, this all seems a bit too simple. For, among other things, we seem to have glossed over the difficulties entailed when one of the parties in a relationship is unwilling to confess, repent, or perhaps even to acknowledge that anything evil or sinful has been done. To explore this question, I turn briefly to a practice of forgiveness enjoined by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel which also points to, at least contingently, some potential limits of forgiveness.

The text is Matthew 18, and more specifically verses 15-20. The passage reads as follows:

> If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven, For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them (NRSV).

This passage points to a structure of resolving conflict through a practice of forgiveness and reconciliation. As such, its instructions are rather clear. Sin ought not to be glossed over; it must be confronted.

In many ways, this passage sounds rather threatening. It is not difficult to recall situations when confronted sin has produced greater destruction, not reconciliation. So we want to shy away from confronting our brother or our sister; ironically, our reason for doing so is often that we want to "keep the peace."

But the logic of this passage suggests that we will only be able to "keep the peace in so far as we foster practices of forgiveness and reconciliation in which sin is acknowledged and confronted. The only way in which that will happen is if we recognize the priority of Christology to ecclesiology—or, more specifically, the priority of God's forgiveness of us in Jesus Christ to our forgiveness of one another through the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we come to the practice of forgiving one another from the stance of those who have already been forgiven *and* acknowledge forgiveness as the Christian way of life.

But the text also recognizes the prospect that there will be circumstances in which forgiveness and reconciliation will not be, at least contingently, fully possible. Why? What then?

Loving Enemies On The Path Of Forgiveness And Reconciliation

According to this passage in Matthew, the reason forgiveness may not be fully possible, and hence would actually be unwise, is that the offenders may not acknowledge their need for forgiveness. If they persistently refuse to acknowledge this, so it is suggested, they ought to be treated as gentiles and tax-collectors. As Stanley Hauerwas has argued, such people "are acting like those who have not learned that they have been forgiven. To act like one not needing forgiveness is to act against the very basis of this community as a community of peacemaking''[17] That is, these people are Christians who live as if there is no God.

Such a description is consistent with the parable of the unforgiving servant which concludes Matthew 18 (18:23-35). The servant is punished because of his failure to manifest forgiveness in his relations with those who were indebted to him. The implication of both of these texts seems to be that, while repentance and confession are not *conditions* of receiving God's forgiveness, they are indispensable means of acknowledging our *need* for forgiveness and hence embodying that forgiveness in our relations with others.

But what should we say about, and how should we act toward, these people who refuse to engage in practices of forgiveness and reconciliation, even if—or perhaps especially if—there are differences in perception about the wrongdoing? By such a refusal, they have excluded themselves from the realm of the Body of Christ, understood as the community of the forgiven, and so ought to be treated as such. The truthfulness of Christian community demands such judgment. This judgment of exclusion is what the notions of "gentile" and a "tax collector" would connote within the Jewish background of Matthew's audience. As outsiders to the fellowship, they may even be termed "enemies."

Before we move too quickly, however, we need to remember how Jesus treats such "enemies" as gentiles and tax-collectors. He continues to reach out to them, to bring them (back) into the fold of God's covenant of grace.[18] We should not coerce them into the fold, nor should we pretend that the conflict and division don't exist. But neither should we "demonize" them, as we so often want to do with enemies, or turn them into "scapegoats."[19]

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus enjoins his disciples to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt. 5:44). Such a call to "love your enemies" is startling in its frank acknowledgment that we will have enemies. While Christ decisively defeated sin and evil through his cross and resurrection, sin and evil's influence have not fully come to an end. So in at least one sense, we still live on *this* side of the fullness of Easter.

But, even if we do and probably always will have enemies––if we are faithfully following Jesus—we are nonetheless called to *love* them. That is a reminder that, in the absence of the fullness of forgiveness and reconciliation, the love of enemies remains an important step whose *telos* must always be the hope for reconciliation, the transformation of enemies into friends.

Such love of enemies has been embodied in many of the holy lives of those we call "saints." Often such people are unknown to many others, but their faithfulness bore—and continues to bear—witness to the forgiving and sanctifying grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Yet there are also examples of people such as Archbishop Oscar Romero whose fidelity to the gospel became most clear in their refusal to demonize others, in their commitment to love even—and perhaps especially—their enemies.

Conclusion

I have been suggesting that the only way we can reclaim the place of forgiveness in Christian theology and life is to recover the distinctiveness of theological language. We should not be ashamed of doing so, however, for it is an extraordinarily rich language. It is the language of Christian proclamation, both in word and deed. It is also a language which not only is more faithful to Christian doctrinal claims about God, the world, and the nature and purpose of human life, but is capable of responding to the genuine and important cries of the world—and of individual people—for the cleansing of sin and the healing of wounds.

Even so, I have only begun to sketch the logic of a Christian understanding of forgiveness. Many important questions and issues have, for the sake of space, been pushed to the side; not the least of these are 1) sorting out the relationship between Jewish and Christian convictions about forgiveness; 2) identifying areas of disagreement and differences of emphasis among ecclesial traditions, both within the history of Christianity and in contemporary conversations and disputes; 3) exploring the implications of Christian claims about forgiveness in relation to accountability and punishment in social and political life, and 4) dealing with objections to a Christian account that have been offered by, among others, Nietzsche and Ivan Karamazov. Even more, that which I have identified and explored needs further development.

But as we live in this time between the times of Christ's forgiveness through his cross and resurrection and the promised coming of the fullness of God's Kingdom, let us be ever watchful. Let us be watchful for the ways in which we can testify to the forgiving, transforming and reconciling power of Easter in a world which all-too-often seems bent on finding new ways to crucify.[20]

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1. The story is told in "Psychiatric Stations of the Cross," in Robert Coles, *Harvard Diary* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), pp. 10-12. All references will be to this version of the story.

2. Theodore Jennings, *The Liturgy of Liberation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), p. 23.

3. Robert C. Roberts., "Therapies and the Grammar of a Virtue," in Richard H. Bell, ed., *The Grammar of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 155.

4. Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), p.27; cited by Roberts, "Therapies and the Grammar of a Virtue," pp. 158-159.

5. Roberts, "Therapies and the Grammar of a Virtue," p. 159.

6. I am indebted to Rowan Williams for much of the formulation of this paragraph, and indeed for many of the themes developed here. See his *Resurrection* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1982).

7. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T.& T., Clark, 1956), p. 300.

8. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Jesus and Forgiveness," trans. Josephine Koeppel, *Communio* 11/4 (1984), p. 332.

9. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p.89.

10. Rowan Williams, *Resurrection*, p. 52.

11. Obviously, this reference to baptism and eucharist as "central" sacraments begs important questions in sacramental theology that have divided various ecclesial traditions. Even more, a full account of Christian forgiveness would have to provide an account, both historically and conceptually, of how "penance" ought to be understood and practiced. My point here, as throughout this article, is to try to provide a framework for recovering the theological significance of forgiveness which is, so far as possible, ecumenically shared among Christians.

12. For further reflections about being a baptismal and eucharistic people, see chapter 3 of my *Transformed Judgment* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

13. Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), p.99. The internal reference is to a passage in Teresa of Avila's *The Way of Perfection.*

14. Frank Lentricchia, "En Route to Retreat: Making it to Mepkin Abbey," *Harper's* 284 (January 1992), p.72.

15. See Terry Tilley's comments in an insightful chapter on confession and forgiveness in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*: "[D]eclarations of confession (which *ipso facto* remake the self) and forgiveness (which *ipso facto* restore relationships) are counteractions to evil." *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, DC:Georgetown University Press, 1991), p.209. More generally, I am indebted to Tilley's arguments for helping me think through some of the dynamics of both confession and forgiveness.

16. Nicholas Lash, "Not quite Politics or Power?", *Modern Theology*, 8/4 (1992), p.363.

17. Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today* (Durham, ND: The Labyrinth Press, 1988), p.94.

18. For a discussion of the implications of Jesus' treatment of Gentiles and tax-collectors for this passage, see Marlin Jeschke, *Discipling in the Church* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988).

19. René Girard has insightfully discussed the importance of "scapegoats," and the ways in which Christian convictions about Jesus Christ challenge the necessity of scapegoats, in a number of works. See particularly *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

20.This essay originated as a lecture given at Wake Forest University; thanks to Ralph Wood for the invitation, and to the audience for their questions and comments. Thanks also to Charles Bobertz, Jim Buckley, Stephen Fowl, Bruce Marshall, Ralph Wood and an anonymous referee for their comments on an earlier version of this essay.

Bible Study of the Gospel of Mark

CHAPTER 15

of THE GOSPEL OF MARK

(chapter 16 will follow in the next issue)

Observe the text to understand the author's meaning:

Read 15:1-5. What question did the high priest ask Jesus in 14:61? Was this a political or theological question?
Now what question does pilate ask Jesus?
Is this political or theological or both? What was Jesus response to Pilate? How many witnesses are called? Does Jesus give further testimony? Want to speculate on why not? Are the chief priest's attempting to get a fair hearing for Jesus? What are they doing?
What is Pilate's response to the situation?

Have there been other people in Mark who responded in the same way to Jesus? Where?

Read 15:6-15. Who is Barabbas? What is he convicted of? Did he break the Roman law? Did he break God's law? What was God's law based on? (See Gen 9:6)
Who did Pilate want to release? Why?

Why does he eventually release Barabbas and agree to crucify Jesus? Is this the role of good government or is this a response to the "polls?"

Calvin observes that it was an abhorrent practice to release a criminal as an act of worship during the passover feast. To defy God's law in Scripture which called the government to punish criminals and call it an act of honor or worship was abhorrent. They "bring insult upon him under the pretext of honor." Discuss.

How does Pilate assess the chief priests?
What role do the chief priests play in relation to the multitude? What was their role supposed to be?
Why are thy not able to fulfill their God ordained calling?
By calling for Jesus' crucifixion are the chief priests breaking the law? Is there impartial government support for their position?
Discuss responsibilities of leadership.
Discuss responsibilities of those who follow leaders.

Notice "king of the Jews" is used 4 times in vs 2-18. And "Pilate" is mentioned 8 times. Do you see this as the king of the Jews verses THE KING OF THE JEWS?
Who is the true king? Can you discuss the difference between the true king and the false by their fruits?

The political king Pilate, the chief priests, and the king of the Jews are the key players in this section. Is the king of the Jews behaving the way the chief priests wanted?

In their mind, if he was the king of the Jews after David, and the Messiah, do you think they expected him to respect their positions and even elevate them to greater positions of power in the new regime? Instead what had Jesus done?

Read 15:16-20. Notice what happens. Where do they take Jesus? How do they dress him?
What do they do to honor his kingship?

Do you see this as an absolute turning upside down of Jesus' rightful place? They bow before him but they do it in mockery instead of devotion.

Read 15:21-32. Vs 24 is a fulfillment of Ps 22:18. Notice in vs 29-32 the visible and invisible realms. What do those passing by, the chief priests and even those crucified with Jesus, charge Jesus with?

What is really happening? Is Jesus saving them?

What in the OT was the significance of the temple? What was the significance of the tearing of the veil. See Ex 26:31-33. What was behind the veil? What took place in the temple? What is the significance of what Jesus is saying and has done regarding the temple? How has the temple changed?

Read 15:33-41. Read Ps 22:1 which Jesus quotes. Why was Jesus forsaken by God?

Does Mark record that any of the disciples were at the crucifixion? Jesus was rejected by men including his own followers. Who was at the crucifixion? Close by?
Who does confess that he is the Son of God?

Read 15:42-47. Who comes to claim Jesus' body? What is the burial proof of? What is Joseph feeling? What is his position? Notice in 14:15 that the "Whole council" was present. Was Joseph there? Do you think he might be feeling repentance?

Notice what kind of cloth Joseph wraps Jesus in. What according to Lev 16:3-4 were the high priests to wear?

Interpret the Text:

1. There are two levels of action here. The visible and the invisible. In the visible realm, a convicted murderer (Barabbas means bar = son, and abba = father; Son of the Father) and political insurrectionist is released from prison and death and an innocent man killed.

It occurs during the Passover feast, a celebration of the time when God passed over the Israelites who had blood on their door posts but killed the first born of the Egyptians.

In the visible, the one who claimed to be Messiah and King is killed by the envy of the religious leaders and mocked as king.

What is happening in the invisible realm which corresponds to the visible? prophecy? passover sacrifice? temple? whose in control? who is high priest? who is king? other?

BIBLE STUDY NOTES

Mark 15:21-32. Calvin suggests that the wine mixed with myrrh was not to drug Jesus for the pain but because it would help the victim to die more quickly by thinning their blood so it would pour out more quickly. At any rate, Jesus chooses not to accept a pain killer or die more quickly.

Notice the references to the temple since Jesus entered Jerusalem:

11:11 - he arrives in Jerusalem and goes to the temple.

11:15-18 -he cleanses the temple saying that they have made it a den of robbers.

11:27 - he taught in the temple

12:35 - he taught in the temple

13:1-3 - the disciples are awestruck by the magnificence of the temple

13:1-3 Jesus says the temple will be destroyed

14:49 - they come with clubs to take Jesus and he asks if he is a criminal, that he taught each day in the temple and they could have taken him any time.

14:58 - Jesus is accused of saying he will destroy the temple made with hands and in three days build another without hands.

15:29 - those passing by mock Jesus that he said he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days

15:38 - the veil of the temple is torn from the top to the bottom.

Calvin says, "The proof which the wicked demand of Christ is such that by showing himself to be the Son of God he must cease to be the Son of God...To show himself Son of God he had to hang on the cross. Now these wicked say that the Redeemer will not, for them, have the place of God's Son unless he comes down from the cross."

Mark 15:33-41. Calvin suggests that this is not an error in translation by hearers unfamiliar with Hebrew but rather an attempt to mock Christ's prayer--to claim he does not know God and therefore calls on Elijah.

News from Around the World

SEVEN MEMBERS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY PERMANENT JUDICIAL COMMISSION (the "supreme court" of the PCUSA) signed a "Concurring Opinion" in 1995 stating that "Decisions by this court and statements issued or actions taken by the General Assembly have erred in treating the 1978 statement [on homosexual practice] as an authoritative interpretation...of the Constitution." They concluded, "If the General Assembly wishes to change or amend the constitutional law of the Church, it must do so in accordance with the *Book of Order* through established process for amendments." If the *Book of Order* does not contain specific wording to prohibit the ordination of those practicing homosexual behavior, it would seem, these seven members are prepared to rule that homosexual ordination is permissible.

There were five openings on this PJC which were filled at this year's General Assembly. Two of the recommendations of the GA Nominating Committee—past moderator of the PCUSA David Dobler and Philip Hull—were rejected by the commissioners who instead elected Mary Lou Koenig and Daniel Saperstein. Patricia Norris, who was a signer of the Concurring Opinion , was re-elected. Also elected were William F. Skinner and James McClure. It is quite possible that a majority now exists on the PJC that could rule in favor of homosexual ordination if clear language prohibiting it is removed from the *Book of Order.*

Amendment B—the "Fidelity and Chastity" amendment is now a part of the *Book of Order*. However, the past Assembly voted to send a proposed amendment to the presbyteries for their vote which would replace "Fidelity and Chastity." Because of its lack of specificity concerning sexual behavior, this proposed amendment, if approved by a majority of the presbyteries, would clear the way for the PJC to rule in favor of homosexual ordination. Presbyteries should vote "no" on the proposed "Fidelity and Integrity" amendment in order to leave untouched the clear word of Amendment B in the *Book of Order* which calls for faithfulness in marriage and celibacy outside of marriage.

THE PCUSA BECAME THE FIRST MAINLINE PROTESTANT DENOMINATION to condemn partial-birth abortion when the GA passed an overture which declared, "... that the procedure known as intact dilation and extraction...of a baby who could live outside the womb is of grave moral concern and should be considered only if the mother's physical life is endangered by the pregnancy."

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