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COMMUNITY AND EMBRACE: REDEMPTIVE FORGIVENESS AND PAUL'S USE OF *CHARIZOMAI*

ZACHARY C. WAGNER[1]

It is a quasi-universal maxim of Western culture that, when sinned against, one ought to forgive others rather than hold grudges against them. Whether or not people would say that they *do* forgive those who wrong them, most would say that they *should*. This cultural value is due in no small part to the influence of Judaism and Christianity in the Western world. However, an interesting development in very recent years has been the collective resentment that has boiled over in our culture related to abuses of power, racial injustice, and violence against women. Sins of racist, homophobic, or misogynistic speech and behavior now seem especially likely to solicit not only condemnation but ongoing resentment. Interestingly, even when people apologize for past comments or actions, it is not uncommon to see willful refusals to absolve and forgive the offender. Indeed, this *refusal to extend forgiveness* is often valorized.[2] Public examples of this pattern range from outrage over a celebrity's past tweets all the way to the dramatic confirmation hearings for now Supreme Court Justice, Brett Kavanaugh. It is our moral duty, some would argue, to *not* forgive and forget. Forgiveness, it would seem, makes a mockery of the need for justice and accountability in our society. If things are going to be set right, we should *not* forgive. Miroslav Volf gives voice to this perspective, "Our cool sense of justice sends the message: the perpetrator *deserves* unforgiveness; it would be unjust to forgive." This perspective seems to have become mainstream through the closely related phenomenon known as "cancel culture," where

[1] Zachary C. Wagner is an MSt candidate in New Testament at the University of Oxford. He also serves as the Editorial Director of the Center for Pastor Theologians.

[2] For example see this article viciously critiquing comedian Louis CK's apology statement following allegations of sexual misconduct (https://mashable.com/2017/11/10/louis-ck-sexual-misconduct-apology-reaction-awful/). We should acknowledge in this case that there are further complicated dynamics of celebrity, status, power, and wealth. Still, the assumption seems to be that an infraction of this sort *should* result in a full loss of social standing. See also Kevin Hart's withdrawal from his Oscar-hosting duties after homophobic tweets were uncovered from years previous (https://www.billboard.com/articles/events/oscars/8492982/kevin-hart-oscar-hosting-controversy-timeline). One could also note the controversy surrounding Milwaukee Brewers' relief pitcher Josh Hader's tweets from 2011 and 2012, which did not surface until 2018 (https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/mlb/allstar/2018/07/18/josh-hader-twitter-all-star-game/794751002/).

"canceling" someone means effectively removing him or her from the public consciousness.

These cultural developments have complicated conversations around forgiveness for Christians. The church's own recent scandals of sexual abuse (notoriously in both the Roman Catholic and Southern Baptist traditions) have tainted her witness. The call to victims of sin, abuse, and mistreatment to simply "forgive and forget" rings hollow. Some wonder whether the New Testament teaching is naïve or under-nuanced in this regard. Or worse, perhaps the biblical teaching on forgiveness is itself immoral, failing to take into account the power dynamics at play in our world and enabling abusers to "get away with" abusive behavior. Or worse still, Christian forgiveness is a mechanism whereby oppressors avoid accountability for their actions. Given these recent conversations and controversies, it is becoming less clear when we should forgive, whether we should forgive, and what it means to forgive.

Many of these questions about the Christian teaching on forgiveness arise, I believe, out of a truncated understanding of the concept itself. In this article I will argue for a more holistic view. I will begin by briefly describing two common but insufficient conceptions of forgiveness before pivoting to a survey of Paul's use of forgiveness language. I will then seek to integrate the biblical, psychological, and theological conversations into a more holistic view of forgiveness that may better equip us to be people of redemption in a cultural increasingly characterized by resentment.

I. TRUNCATED VIEWS OF FORGIVENESS

The first common concept of forgiveness is what Leron Shults and Steven Sandage call *forensic forgiveness*, "a transaction in which one party agrees not to exact what the law requires."[3] This could include refusing to press charges in a legal matter or simply "releasing" an offender from the punishment of resentment, revenge, or disassociation. Such a transaction is usually what Westerners (and perhaps Christians in particular) have in mind when they think about what forgiveness is. The assumption is that forgiveness implies pardoning, dropping legal charges, or declining to exact punishment. We should be quick to affirm that there is a significant forensic component to the biblical concept of forgiveness. This is also naturally borne out in the use of the term in the English language—for example, forgiving a debt or forgiving a prison sentence. For Christians, it will be natural to think of God's forgiveness involving being spared the wages of sin: death and hell. However, just because there is a forensic component to forgiveness does not mean that it constitutes the sum total of the biblical concept.

A second cultural concept of forgiveness, most common in psychological and psychotherapeutic discussions, is what Shults and Sandage call *therapeutic forgiveness*, a process of internal change that takes place over time as a person moves slowly from resentment to empathy. This type of forgiveness involves "reducing one's motivation for avoidance and

3 Steven J. Sandage & F. Leron Shults, *The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 20.

revenge and increasing one's motivation for goodwill toward a specific offender."[4] In this conception, it has become common for psychotherapists and counselors to seek to cultivate forgiveness with their clients because of the positive physical and mental health benefits associated with it (and the negative health outcomes associated with resentment and unforgiveness). In short, forgiveness is good for you. Unforgiveness is bad for you. This view of forgiveness is also reflected in the popular notion that bitterness and resentment are poisonous to our hearts and bodies. Psychological research has repeatedly demonstrated this to be true. Forgiveness is the process of release, draining this poison from our mind and body, so we can live full and joyful lives. Again, we should readily affirm that there is indeed a therapeutic element to forgiveness, but this—even combined with forensic forgiveness—does not contain the sum total of the biblical view.

To summarize, *forensic forgiveness* approaches the concept in technical terms: what is the transaction of forgiveness. *Therapeutic forgiveness* approaches the concept in motivational and pragmatic terms: why should we forgive. But what more can be said from a distinctly Christian perspective? How can theology be brought into conversation with these judicial and psychological conceptions?

II. EXTENDING GRACE: FORGIVENESS LANGUAGE IN PAUL

There is much to be said about the New Testament teaching on forgiveness, especially that of Jesus himself in the synoptic tradition. However, there are also interesting insights to be gleaned from the Apostle Paul's contribution on this topic. Still, the first thing that we should note about Paul's use of forgiveness language is how little he uses it at all. This may at first seem surprising. Many interpreters of Paul, particularly since the Protestant Reformation, have viewed the apostle's doctrine of justification by faith apart from works of the law to be at the very center of his theology. Assuming the forensic concept noted above, the question of forgiveness is closely related (even identical!) with the question of how sinners are justified before God. However, we find forgiveness language is, as remarked by Krister Stendahl, "spectacularly absent"[5] in Paul, particularly when compared to justification language. The most common verb in the New Testament for forgiveness, *aphiemi*, appears only once in Paul with the sense of "to forgive"—and that in a quotations from the LXX.[6] Paul is more likely to use *charizomai*,[7] "to extend grace" or "to show oneself gracious by forgiving

[4] This is Steven Sandage's definition of "therapeutic forgiveness." Sandage & Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 23.

[5] Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentile and Other Essays* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976), 23.

[6] Rom 4:7. The corresponding nominal form, ἄφεσις, appears only in parallel passages Eph 1:7 and Col 1:14. Again, this is in stark contrast to the synoptic tradition, for example, where it appears 47x in Matthew alone.

[7] James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 327.

wrongdoing,"[8] but this term also appears relatively infrequently, 10x with the sense of "to forgive." Paul's preference for *charizomai* may not be surprising, given the centrality of grace (*charis*) in his soteriology and ecclesiology. While we may note other terms in Paul that relate to forgiveness,[9] for the purposes of this article, I will focus on the use of *charizomai*.

In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul exhorts his readers to "extend grace" (*charizasthai*) to a person in the congregation who has sinned against Paul, and by extension the entire community. We should first note that forgiveness here does include a forensic forbearance that spares the offender ongoing punishment (2:6). However, the act of forgiveness goes *beyond* a forensic remission of penalty. Parallel to Paul's call for forgiveness is the call to *reaffirm love* for the offender (2:8), further explicating what Paul understands this extension of grace to entail. We should also note Paul's communal emphasis in this passage. Both the offense itself and the forgiveness and grace extended are described using corporate terms. In 2:5 he writes, "if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but…to all of you." Similarly, in 2:10 he writes, "Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive." Paul's expectation is that Christian communities be characterized by grace, forbearance, and an affirmation of love even after offenses have been suffered. Paul does not, however, make explicit in 2 Corinthians *why* Christians ought to forgive. For this, we must look to two of his other letters.

Paul's most well-known uses of *charizomai* appear in Ephesians and Colossians. There is a logical flow in Colossians that follows from God's extension of grace to us to our extension of grace to others. The verb *charizomai* first appears in Colossians in 2:13: "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven (*charisamenos*) us all our trespasses." Both the second and third uses of *charizomai* appear in 3:13, which reads, "Bear with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgive (*charizomenoi*) each other; just as the Lord has forgiven (*echarisato*), so you must also [forgive]." In Ephesians, the same logical flow from God's forgiveness of us to our forgiveness of others is present. In his opening blessing, Paul writes that in Christ we have "redemption through his blood, the forgiveness (*aphesin*) of sins, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph 1:7). Then, just as in Colossians, Paul includes in his closing exhortations the charge to "be kind to one another, forgiving (*charizomenoi*) each other, as God in Christ also has forgiven (*echarisato*) you" (Eph 4:32).

For our purposes, there are two observations to note. 1) Forgiveness is not only a forensic transaction, but also a communal process, involving a mutual extending of grace to one another, and 2) the imperative to extend grace (i.e. forgive) one another is grounded in the reality of the grace God in

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[8] BDAG, 1078.

[9] L. Morris, "Forgiveness" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters,* Gerald F. Hawthorn, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid, eds., (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 311. For a longer discussion on the semantic range of these different Greek terms see F. Leron Shults discussion in *Faces of Forgiveness,* 134.

Christ has extended to us. While there is overlap between the conceptuality of justification and forgiveness from God, the forgiveness Christians ought to extend one another is not merely transactional but relational. As Sandage and Shults write, "Paul's understanding of forgiveness is not primarily a decision marked on a legal or financial balance sheet; it is the real presence of divine grace that heals human relations."[10] This will prove helpful for us to keep in mind when considering forgiveness in our own cultural and pastoral context.

III. FORGIVENESS AS RE-HUMANIZATION

Psychological researchers have identified common mental barriers that make forgiveness difficult. One common barrier occurs when the victim "totalize[s] the offender in terms of the offense (e.g. the offender is a liar, a cheat, a thief, a murderer) in such a way that the offender is infrahumanized (i.e. seen as comparatively less human) or dehumanized (e.g. demonized, viewed as a monster)."[11] To counter this tendency, a strategy employed by psychotherapists for cultivating therapeutic forgiveness includes encouraging them to think empathetically about their offenders.[12] To activate empathy, clients try to "[focus] on the human qualities of the person who hurt them."[13] In essence, the client is being reminded (and reminding themselves) that the person who harmed them is human.

What makes affirming the humanity of our offenders so difficult is that our own humanity has been denied in some way by the offense. It seems that we withhold forgiveness precisely because we wish (perhaps subconsciously) to deny personhood to the one who has denied it to us. There is often another subconscious motivation at play. Our totalization of the offense and de-humanization of the offender dulls the edge of the pain we feel. For instance, it may be easier for victims of sexual assault to cope with their trauma if they dismiss the agency and humanity of their assailant. If the perpetrator was less than human, then they are perhaps less blameworthy. Perhaps the offender was simply a "pervert" who could not help himself. Or perhaps he was not in his right mind. The victim does not have to grapple with the terrible reality that a truly human moral agent has harmed them so grievously. In this case, the dehumanization of the offender is not borne out of a willful or petty refusal to forgive. It is a coping mechanism—a learned survival skill—whereby the victim does not have to face the magnitude of the betrayal caused by sin.

How then can we as Christians begin to rehumanize those who sin against us? One key to cultivating our willingness to forgive is the

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[10] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 138.

[11] C. V. O. Witvliet and L. M. Root Luna, "Forgiveness and Well-Being," in D. Dunn, ed., *Positive Psychology* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 132.

[12] One research tested practice for forgiveness: 1) Emphasize humanity, 2) see the offense as evidence of needed growth, 3) desire good and change for the offender. Noted in Witvliet & Root Luna, "Forgiveness and Well-Being," 131–152.

[13] Witvliet and Root Luna, "Forgiveness and Well-Being," 143.

acknowledgement that we too have caused harm, if not to the perpetrator directly, then certainly to others. We should forgive because we too need forgiveness—oftentimes from the very person whom we are hesitant to forgive. As difficult as it may be, we must here resist the urge to compare the severity of offense, using the relative "insignificance" of our own sin to justify our unforgiveness of the sins of others. We can acknowledge the severity of the harm we have experienced, while also acknowledging the reality of the harm that we have caused to others. This is what Miroslav Volf calls the "common undifferentiated sinfulness that requires a balanced reciprocal confession of sin."[14] This mutual acknowledgement of our universal need to be forgiven is the foundation for our forgiveness of others. A therapeutic view of forgiveness, while valid as far as it goes, falls short of a robust explanation as to *why* we should forgive. It is not enough to simply say that forgiveness is good for your mental and physical health. The fact is that bitterness, resentment, and fantasizing about revenge can be satisfying and cathartic emotional experiences. But from a Christian perspective this will not do. We should forgive, not just because it is good for our health, but because we too are sinners in need of forgiveness.

As Christians, we believe that our universal need for forgiveness extends not only to our relationships with others, but most fundamentally to our relationship with our Creator. In forgiving us, God has affirmed our personhood, our humanity. Indeed, to affirm the humanity of someone else is to affirm their right, most fundamentally, to existence. This is precisely what God has done for us in Christ. He does not deny our personhood, fractured and compromised as it has been and would continue to be apart from redemption. His extension of grace and the gift of eternal life amounts to his affirmation of our dignity and his willing our continued and abiding existence. This does not amount to a denial of the blameworthiness of our sin—quite the opposite, in fact. In Christ's death, God affirms our humanity both by exacting the just punishment our sin deserves and by willing our continued existence through the gift of eternal life. This is redemptive forgiveness.

This desire to have our existence affirmed and blessed is a universal human experience. This inter-personal affirmation of personhood is precisely why exclusively forensic conceptions of forgiveness are insufficient. As Shults provocatively writes, "the deleterious effects of the dominance of legal metaphors in the Christian doctrine of salvation have nowhere been felt more deeply than in the understanding and practice of forgiveness."[15] He writes later, "The legal 'salvation' of a judicial verdict releases me from a punishment, but it does not cure my ontological anxiety."[16] Our desire to be forgiven is a desire to be existentially affirmed, not merely judicially cleared. And our desire to have our personhood acknowledged and our future

[14] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Revised and Updated (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), 119.

[15] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 103.

[16] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 215.

guaranteed, in Christ, has been granted. The moral imperative associated with this extension of grace is that we should extend this same grace to others. Echoing the Apostle Paul's logic, Shults writes, "Being forgiven means receiving new being. It means finding one's very nature wholly renewed and open to a whole and healing future. Forgiving others donates the possibility of new being."[17] In psychological terms, inter-subjectivity enables forgiveness when we begin to view the other person as a center of consciousness equivalent to ourselves—affording him or her the status that God has granted us in Christ. This is precisely what Paul is calling believers to in Ephesians and Colossians: because God has willed your continued existence at the cross, you should do likewise to those who sin against you.

IV. COMMUNITY AND EMBRACE

Christians should aspire to a view of forgiveness that is communal and redemptive. Forgiveness is not simply a canceling of forensic debt of sin. Nor is it simply an internal attitude change within the person sinned against. Forgiveness is also an acted-out, communal reality. Expanding further on the concept of ontological anxiety mentioned above, Shults writes, "We find it difficult to suppress our hope for a future in which the particularity of our being will not be annihilated. We hope to belong in a peaceful and joyful pattern of harmonious relations with others. Redemptive forgiveness as sharing in divine grace opens up that future."[18] Our extension of grace to others is the mechanism by which we can start to build the community of God's New Creation in the present, a world characterized reconciliation, rather than resentment. As Miroslav Volf writes, "Forgiveness is the boundary between exclusion and embrace."[19]

Psychologists are often quick to note the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation.[20] Theologians have been hesitant to separate these, I believe, with good reason. From a psychotherapeutic perspective, one can, in theory, forgive an offender without being restored to relationship with him or her. This is because therapeutic forgiveness emphasizes the interior, subjective reality, the decrease of avoidance and negative emotion. As outlined by Sandage and Shults, therapeutic forgiveness need not imply relational reconciliation. Psychotherapists and scientists are helpfully identifying the need for restoration of trust in relationship for true reconciliation to occur, which of course involves something beyond a decrease of negative emotions toward the offender. From this frame of reference, forgiveness does not necessarily require reconciliation. Indeed, there are times where, in a fallen world, it cannot.

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[17] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 211.

[18] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 207.

[19] Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 126.

[20] E. L. Worthington, et al., "Forgiveness and Reconciliation within the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality" in J. D. Aten, K. A. O'Grady, & E. L. Worthington, Jr., eds., *The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality for Clinicians: Using Research in Your Practice* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 276.

However, from a Christian theological perspective, the process of forgiveness involves "much more than just the absence of hostility sustained by the absence of contact; *peace is communion between former enemies*. Beyond offering forgiveness, Christ's passion aims at restoring such communion."[21] Indeed, Christian forgiveness blurs the lines between forgiveness and reconciliation drawn out in a social scientific perspective. The Christian will recognize that without an offer of reconciliation to relationship, forgiveness is incomplete—precisely because of the communal aspirations Christian forgiveness implies. We should be quick to note that in many cases, an "incomplete" forgiveness may be the best we can attain this side of the *parousia*. Still, Christian forgiveness leans forward in hope toward reconciliation.

Any unforgiveness that Christians harbor is a barrier between them and the final reconciliation of all things in Christ. We should recognize that even the vindication of a legal decision in our favor will not in itself solve the estrangement that has befallen human relationships because of brokenness and sin. Volf writes elsewhere:

> [E]ven after the question of 'right and wrong' has been settled by the judgment of grace, it is still necessary to move through the door of mutual embrace to enter the world of perfect love. And through that door the inhabitants of the world to come will move enabled by the indwelling Christ, who spread out his arms on the cross to embrace all wrongdoers. When former enemies have embraced and been embraced as belonging to the same community of love in the fellowship of the Triune God, then and *only* then will they have stepped into a world in which each enjoys all and therefore all take part in the dance of love.[22]

Christian hope looks to a time and a place where all relationships will be reconciled. And, in Christ, the future reconciliation and healed community has already begun. In hope, we imagine a future redeemed version of the offender, because this is the future that God has "imagined" (and made so) for us in Christ. We should endeavor to have our disposition toward the offender match the divine disposition towards us.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have sought to draw out what I see as two emphases in Paul's use of charizomai, namely that forgiveness is 1) communal and 2) a moral imperative deriving from our acceptance by God in Christ. I have also sought to demonstrate that forgiveness entails more than the withholding of punishment or the diminishment of negative emotions. For, as Shults writes, "When forgiveness is confined to a formal juridical declaration, it does not immediately touch the material agony of shame and anger that

21 Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 127.

22 Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 181.

crush real human life in community."[23] As I noted in the introduction, it has become increasingly difficult in our culture to even understand how forgiveness is possible. Here the forensic definition of forgiveness holds sway. If forgiveness only means withholding legal punishment, this seems to be exactly what our culture does not currently want to accept. Should we shield abusers from judicial and legal repercussions in the name of Christian forgiveness? By no means.

Here we should pause and note the importance of being on guard against common abuses of the call to forgiveness. When pastors and church leaders encourage congregants to forgive those who sin against them, it can easily be heard and understood as a call to simply "forgive, forget, and get over it"—and *definitely* do not take legal action. This can lead to an alarming situation in which a congregant may feel that she is acting in a sub-Christian way if she reports her husband's domestic abuse to the police. However, there is nothing especially "spiritual" or even "Christian" about ignoring abuse. The Apostle Paul exhorts his readers in Ephesians to "have no fellowship with the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead expose them" (Eph 5:11). We should remind ourselves and others that sweeping sin under the rug is not what is implied in Christian forgiveness.

The abused wife can cultivate redemptive forgiveness in her heart while also taking appropriate steps to ensure her own physical safety and that of her children. And her pastor should encourage her to do both. Indeed, pastors should be ambassadors for redemptive forgiveness *and* for the appropriate administration of justice according to the law. *This is no contradiction.* And the feeling that it is a contradiction is bound up in our narrow, forensic view of forgiveness. Indeed, as long as forgiveness is defined in strictly judicial terms, it will be difficult to understand how we can forgive someone and insist that they receive just consequence for abusive or illegal behavior. Until we take appropriate steps to correct our view of forgiveness, our churches will remain vulnerable to the abuses of power that all too often accompany a sub-Christian view of forgiveness and justice. We should also note that this view of forgiveness has been itself been used as a weapon of spiritual abuse in the hands of pastors who refuse to be held to account for their own abusive behavior. This is why cultivating a more nuanced and biblical view of forgiveness is of the utmost importance for the health and safety of our congregations. Seeking to understand for ourselves and teach God's people the differences between forensic, therapeutic, and redemptive forgiveness will equip us with appropriate categories for navigating these complex issues.

As pastors, we should emphasize along with counselors and psychotherapists that unforgiveness is stressful and unhealthy. We should also note that the therapeutic mental and physical health benefits of forgiving have been well documented. However, we should also exhort our congregations to a deeper, redemptive forgiveness that is truly only made possible in Christ, who has affirmed our humanity and enfolded us into his redeemed

[23] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 125.

community by extending grace to us. And just as our transformation and redemption in Christ is a lifelong process, we can give ourselves grace to grow in our capacity to extend grace to those who have wronged us. We cannot forgive by trying harder; this capacity too is cultivated by the Spirit and given to us by grace.[24] Transformation into the community of our future hope is a long-term group project. As N. T. Wright writes, "Christian living in the present consists of anticipating this ultimate reality through the Spirit-led, habit-forming, truly human practice of faith, hope, and love, sustaining Christians in their calling to worship God and reflect his glory into the world."[25] This is the fully-reconciled community that the eucharist prefigures, a community of life-affirming embrace where the brokenness of ourselves and our relationships has been enfolded into God's own life by the grace extended to us in Christ. Indeed, "[i]t is the way of those forgiven by Christ to forgive freely the wrongs people do to them."[26]

[24] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness,* 169.

[25] N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters,* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012) 67.

[26] Sandage and Shults, *Faces of Forgiveness*, 312.