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Forgiveness as a Platform for Resolving Conflicts and Restoring Peaceful Coexistence in Context of Counter Religious Violence Among Muslims and Christians in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

Forgiveness as a platform for resolving conflicts and restoring peaceful coexistence in context of counter religious violence among Muslims and Christians in Nigeria attempts to apply the nexus of Christian forgiveness from Scripture in restoring broken relationships between warring parties. It leads to an inner healing of the mind, soul and body as a people to have positive impact on both the churches, Mosques and Nigerian society. These major religious groups in Nigeria have been plagued by difficulty of forgiving each other. Thereby landing them into suffering hot flashes of bitterness that seem to reoccur in an unforgiving spirit which always seeks retaliation that provoke counter violence upon violence. The aim challenges all people to show God's grace in the same way and to the same extent that they have received it from God so that both Muslims and Christians can escape religious violence and practice peaceful coexistences. The article begins with an introduction, statement of the problem; called as forgivers in context of religious violence; implication of religious views on forgiveness; forgiveness in Christian faith; God's role in restoring broken relationships; forgiveness as a practice in response to religious violence; recommendation and conclusion.

Key words: Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Conflict and Peace Studies, Religious Violence,

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Introduction

Who hasn't been wronged by someone unjustly in their lives? Ever since Cain killed Abel in Genesis 3, the world has been a place where sin has ruled and injustice has been the consequence. So, it is natural that the creation would groan under the weight of the sin that man has brought on it (Romans 8:18-21). Even the one who came to set it right, Jesus the Messiah, was crucified by the very ones He came to save. If there were ever a time that an article such as this was needed, it is now. Violence has become the new "normal" today. An Internet search uncovered fifty-nine armed conflicts going on in the world today, with seven of the top fifteen wars active at the time of this writing being in Africa. Enter African Christians, and one is faced with a dilemma. What should one do when one has been forgiven by God through faith in Jesus Christ, and then suffers at the hand of those who, like Cain, claim the authority to be able to make their own judgments of what is right and what is wrong? Haven't there been times when we, like Peter, felt we had to take justice into our own hands when he used his sword to defend the One being arrested that night (Luke 22:49)?

As a believer in Nigeria, who has stood for his faith in Jesus Christ, it is necessary to speak deeply from the heart and personal experience in addressing with a theological perspective of a Christian's response to violence. Thoughtful response helps Christians think through how to suffer for Christ's sake while actively pursuing peace with those who are not followers of Jesus. This is a must-apply for Christians who seek to imitate Christ. There is not even a hint of bravado in thinking otherwise; only simple humility in reflecting on the believer's reaction to his enemies. The power from God's Words comes only from holy boldness. Forgiveness is not child's play in countering violence. While the modern cliché goes, "I will forgive but never forget," this work focuses every reader's thought on the weakness of one's own willingness to forgive and give peace a chance.

Statement of the Problem

Unfortunately, forgiveness is rarely discussed or applied in the context of peace settlement at the aftermath of violence in a given Christian Church in Nigeria that leads to restoring broken relationships. Although it is a hard subject to preach, teach, and write about, the burden to explore forgiveness comes out from years of witnessing blood shed that occurs as a result of religious violence. Paul J. Meyer (2006:28) notes that "If you are alive, you have experienced the need to forgive. Having friends opens you to hurt; being married opens you to hurt; pastoring a church opens you to hurt, being in a leadership position opens you to hurts; being part of a family opens them to hurt and playing on a football team opens you to hurt." Much more than what Meyer mentions is the reality that living in a violent nation often result to hurts that takes time to heal. I chose to focus on the elements of forgiveness as a major component of the entire spectrum of peace making and conflict resolution when violent approaches conflict each other. When applied consistently in the life of Christians, this one fundamental of the sanctified life makes a profound difference in influencing believers to respond to non-believers. With love. Rather than counter violence to prevail.

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Called as Forgivers in Context of Religious Violence

For a Christian, forgiveness among God's people is a normal way of life. Children of God who regularly confess sins and forgive others demonstrate strong faith in Christ, thereby modelling Christian life for the church. Every Christian is called by God to serve as an instrument of forgiving others. Sinners who begin to grasp the seriousness of their plight treasure that God has forgiven us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). Who is qualified to tell others about this great gift and of the need for forgiveness than those who need it most? So, God chose us, forgiven sinners, to serve as His representatives in delivering this lifesaving message about the need to forgive others. Theologically, one cannot consider the forgiveness of another person outside the context of God's forgiveness. Soares-Prabhu (1986:57,68) opines that "The reason the Christian scriptures constantly relate our forgiveness to God's forgiveness is because readiness to forgive others is not just a happy trait of character or an acquired psychological disposition." Forgiveness involves a religious attitude rooted in the Christian experience of God's love in him or her. God always plays the leading role of forgiveness. This is the sense that sin is a physical evil for the victim and a moral evil for the perpetrator.

The message of forgiveness is that a radical healing of the sinner takes place; no other mechanism has the power of love to forgiveness. Forgiving with love is the vehicle of hope that love will transform the violator of peace in the name of religious belief. F.X. Dumortier (1993:125,138) notes that "Forgiving is the ability to envision a future which would not be built on the past and at the same time; the past exists as part of one's life." This person sees that the strength of the present and the strength of forgiveness opens one to the promise of the future through the God of mercy and God of forgiveness.

A person may wonder if forgiveness, understood as revealed and incarnated in Jesus Christ, is impossible on the human plane when in a violent environment. Forgiveness, as understood in the gospels, shows that humans enter into a new dimension of human relations of God's graciousness and the unselfish love of Christ. Thus, John Patton (1985:16) notes that "Forgiveness is something that one discovers. Forgiveness as a discovery is different from the traditional meaning of forgiveness as an act, or an attitude, or psychologically behavioural technique of reducing pain is self-injury." Patton's idea of forgiveness is not seen as doing something, but discovering something—that I am more like those who have hurt me, rather than different from them. I am able to forgive when I discover that I am in no position to forgive. Although the experience of God's forgiveness may involve confession of and the sense of being forgiven for specific sins, at its heart, it is the recognition of my inception into the community of sinners those affirmed by God as his children.

Implication of Religious Views on Forgiveness

Let us contrast the teaching on the subject of forgiveness in Christianity with that of certain world religions and traditions. The five examples chosen are: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Baha'i. In the Christian faith, the parable of the prodigal son is a well-known concept for the practice of forgiveness. In Christianity, according to Williams, "Forgiveness is generally understood as an act of pardon or release from an injury, offense, or debt and the forgiver shows compassion, while the forgiven shows repentance." Yet, some religious doctrinal philosophies place much emphasis on their human shortcomings so find it difficult to forgive. Others make little or no distinction between human and or divine forgiveness. McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen quote Dorff that in Judaism, "*mehillah* denotes the wiping away of a transgression, that is, forgiveness; while *selimah* denotes reconciliation." In

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Islam, according to Ali, “Forgiveness means closing an account of offense against God or any of His creation, and it must meet the criteria of sincerity.” In Buddhism, according to Hallisey, “There is no unified foundation against which a single ‘Buddhist’ concept of forgiveness might be sought.” Generally speaking, though, the notion of forgiveness comprises two factors: “First, the removal of an expectation of retribution; and second, the renouncing of anger or resentment toward someone who has offended you. Both factors represent changes of attitude, and both are highly valued in Buddhist cultures, but they are generally kept distinct as quite different virtues.” In Hinduism, according to Temoshok and Chandra, “Forgiveness has been defined as the unaffected condition of the mind of a person, even while being reviled or chastised ... also described as absence of agitation of the mind even though there is cause for agitation.” Hence, in Christianity, Protestants stand the test for a better response to religious violence because they have better understanding on what forgiveness means in Christ.

Forgiveness in Christian Faith

In Christianity, most Protestant denominations teach that a believer receives forgiveness directly through personal and sincere confession of sins to God. The believer completes this by an act of forgiving others once they show a repentant attitude. However, in view of the absence of confidentiality among congregations, many Protestant churches emphasize private confession rather than public confession. Catholics and Orthodox churches seem to build on a wrong interpretation of the verse “Whoever’s sins you retain, they have been retained,” (John 20:23). Some also teach that the atonement Jesus offers on the cross is the vehicle through which God forgives the believer of his or her sins. Conflict in a world tainted by sin is inevitable. Every day we breathe, we wrestle with two natures: the sinful nature inherited from Adam and the new creation founded in Christ. In confession and forgiveness, Christians live the Good News and share the Gospel with others. Confessing sin is a profession of our faith in Christ, giving witness to our confidence in God’s forgiveness. Forgiving sins of others is the purpose for which Jesus sent us into the world. Forgiveness is the daily exercise of faith for Christ’s followers.

Confessing sin is a profession of our faith in Christ, giving witness to our confidence in God’s forgiveness. Forgiving the sins of others is the purpose for which Jesus sent us into the world. Religious people frequently miss them because we are too accustomed to recognizing them or practicing the exercises of forgiveness. When two people find themselves enmeshed in conflict, invariably they sin against one another. From a theological view, interpersonal forgiveness is letting go of the negative feeling the perpetrator has caused. Interpersonal forgiveness involves both behavioural and cognitive systems. It is letting go of negative feelings. The choice is not to retaliate, but to respond in a loving way and giving up the right to hurt back. The negative thoughts regarding the offender are changed when the decision to forgive is made. The good and bad aspects of the offender are integrated.

Theologically, forgiveness cannot be understood outside of the context of God’s forgiveness without reference to sin and evil. Forgiving the offender is understood from a practical pastoral perspective as something that results in healing. This understanding of forgiveness does not simply reduce it to something to be achieved or a behavioural technique to reduce pain. Forgiveness is a biblical command. In Christianity forgiveness is primarily discussed within the context of God forgiving man rather than human effort. Randall Ceclre (2007:5) notes that “Forgive as God forgive you means to forgive in the same way, using the

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same means to forgive. And how God has forgiven you? He forgives through Jesus as the atoning satisfaction of his justice. The Apostle Paul says we are to “forgive as the Lord forgave you,” (Colossians 3:13). Paul was giving clear instructions on how to forgive. Forgive as God forgave you means to forgive in the same way, using the same means of God’s grace used to forgive you and me. And how has God forgiven) you and *me*? He forgave us through the blood of Jesus as the atoning satisfaction of His justice. In contemporary society, there are times when disagreements, resentments, and conflicts can cause bitterness and set apart people for years without forgiving each other as has been the case in context of Nigeria which is always caused by violently responding to crisis that is religious in nature. How does one help the average person or church member understand the importance of forgiveness? How can people really understand how to forgive and forget in the midst of violence?

God’s Role in Restoring Broken Relationships

Understanding God’s forgiveness plays an important role in healing wounds sustained in religious violence. What is God’s plan in dealing with and reconciling a shattered relationship through religious violence? Forgiveness is not a superficial action, but God’s initiative. In Exodus, God spoke to Moses that He is “slow to anger, abounding in love, faithfulness and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin,” (Exodus 34:6-7). J.P. Oliver and J. Salach (1997:260) notes that “One most important thing about God is he forgives sins.” Meyer (2006:59) also notes that “God wants us to be real and honest.” Paul explains to the believers in Ephesus, to let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and slander, and all malice be put away and to be kind to one another by being tender-hearted, forgiving each other just as God in Christ has forgiven those who have faith in him, (Ephesians 4:31,32). This is a demonstration of Christ’s law of forgiveness as taught in the Gospels (Matthew 6:14-15; 18:35; Mark 11:35).

How are shattered relationships restored? It is through forgiveness. How are we to forgive? We are to forgive just as God forgives. When we offend each other, we are to seek forgiveness from each other to restore fractured relationships. God does not forgive others, but mainly for His mercy. When we understand His mercy, we will want to imitate Him (Ephesians 5:1). If you are a victim of bitterness, wrath, anger or any other offenses, there is a biblical model that obligates you “to forgive just as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Matthew 18:21, 22). Putting it simply, our forgiveness and God’s forgiveness should be the same. Forgiveness is all about how broken relationships are restored.

The kind of forgiveness that counts is imitating God’s forgiveness. It should help readers to reshape all their thinking about relationships that are shattered and apply God’s model of forgiveness that leads to healing. It is not a surprise that Gary Inrig (2005:48) argues “Where there is the forgiveness of sin, there is life and blessedness.” Mipo E. Dadang (2014:5,6) reiterates that “Every person needs to know it is true that forgiveness is a foundational surviving tool for living peacefully and resolving soared relationships between all religious groups who are hurting.” There is an interesting model of God’s forgiveness in the book of Micah (Micah 7:18,19).

After Micah prophesied a stinging rebuke for the sins of Israel, he came to realize God’s forgiving nature. He could not avoid the amazing grace of God either, and testified, God who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of his possession? He does not retain his anger forever because He delights in unchanging love. He has compassion on us and he treats our iniquity with favor. Yes, you will cast all our sins into

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the depths of the sea. Oliver (1997:260) notes that, “In the Old Testament, forgiveness comprises of the removal of sin and the restoration of communion between God and humanity. ... It depends solely on God’s love, mercy, and compassion towards the sinner ... and on his readiness to initiate the process of reconciliation and atonement. It requires and usually goes hand-in-hand with the confession of sin, repentance, restitution, and renewal.” The Psalmist warns that to fail to forgive someone can lead to depression, anger, strife, physical lethargy, alienation from others, mental agitation, instability, indecisiveness, spiritual dullness and forgetfulness (Psalm 32, 38, 51). Note that bitterness resulting from a lack of forgiveness is likened to an insolent child who does not take correction. Throughout years of living and coping with those who cause religious violence on other people, I have adopted three principles regarding forgiveness. First, point out to people that the key to forgiving others is to remember how much God has forgiven them as individuals. Is it difficult for you to forgive someone who has offended you when God has forgiven you so much? Secondly, grasp the concept of God’s unconditional love and forgiveness, which helps you love and forgive others as well.

A third key function is to always be an agent of peace to people around you. As I was writing this article, I couldn’t help laughing. There was a day when one of my daughters and I had a meeting half way down the kitchen. My daughter likes loud background music as she mops around the house or does the dishes. That day I was working in his study for a paper presentation, so I needed a quiet environment in order to concentrate. Her music loudly penetrated the study preventing me from concentrating. So, I went out to the sitting room and asked her to lower the volume of the tape down slightly. She happily did so. When I returned to the study room, I flicked the door to shut behind me. But the breeze through the study windows caught the door and slammed it shut with a very loud bang. As I turned to my desk, I realized that my daughter, not knowing what has happened, might have thought I had slammed the door in anger at the volume of her music.

As I stepped back into the sitting room, she was on her way to the study thinking I might have been angry at her. We both laughed after I explained what had happened. That is the way resolving conflicts rapidly works. Both parties are to follow the biblical way of managing conflicts so that it does not result in resentment. John says, “If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness” (I John 1:9). God promises to forgive anyone who acknowledges his or her sins before Him. This means forgiveness is a covenant. It is an agreement to erase the offender’s sin–debt in light of his or her admitting what has been done is wrong. Hence, there is the need to ask for forgiveness. It is interesting to note that it is a common phenomenon among Christians to say, “I am sorry” when admitting they have offended someone. This is a worldly emasculation of the biblical concept of forgiveness. Consider for a moment what the sentence “I am sorry” really means. It means, “I feel bad because of what happened.”

Forgive me, on the one hand, means something totally different. It means “I owe you a payable debt because of what I did.” If I accidentally step on my wife’s toes, I say “I am sorry” to her. However, if I take a stone and hit her toes with it and injure her seriously, is “I am sorry” really what is needed? In the first incident, stepping on her toe was accidental. I expressed my distress over the discomfort I caused my wife by saying “I am sorry.” That was adequate because no wrong had taken place. I wished it had never happened. In the second incident, an offense had occurred. I would be seen as angry and malicious in my actions. Therefore, I would owe God and my wife a payable wrongful debt because of my attitude and

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actions. The fact that I felt sorry may and or may not mean anything. Judas Iscariot (Matthew 27:1-6) was sorry after he betrayed Jesus, but his sin was not cancelled because he did not ask Jesus to forgive him. The fact that he felt really sorry about the act he committed did not remove the real guilt of what he did. The fact that he wished he had not done it did not erase his sin debt. The process of forgiveness can be a liberating experience. If it is practised proactively, it can be a wonderful experience in life. Forgiveness occurs because we have been given the ability to make choices. We have the choice to forgive or not to forgive and no one can force us to do either. If we want to forgive someone, no one can stop us, no matter how poorly they may act. This ability to forgive is a manifestation of the personal control we have over our lives. It is nice to reflect upon and feel the respect that we have been given to be able to make such profound choices.

The option to forgive also implies that we have discretion as to whether or not we absorb the offense people caused us in the first place. While forgiving may be a difficult choice for many of us, imagine how our lives would have been if we rarely or never used our power of choice to absorb offense. Since we have choices, would it not make sense to limit the number of times we are hurt or offended so that the need to forgive is minimized? (Frederick Luskin (2002:13) concludes that “The ability to live life without absorbing offense, without apportioning blame, and constantly forgiving are choices leading to peace. This ability to practice proactive forgiveness happens within four dimensions.

Luskin (2002:13) mentions four stages that can lead to forgiveness.” In the first stage, a person is filled with self-justified anger. At some point in a person’s life, may have been hurt and you are mad at the person you feel offended you. You blame the person committing the offense for how you are feeling. It is their action and not your choice to respond because you feel they are the cause of your anger. You have forgotten that you have a choice on how you will react. So, you become angry and convinced that it would not be right to forgive the offender. At this stage, there is usually acute and submerged anger.

The second stage towards forgiveness emerges after feeling angry with someone for a while then you realize that the anger does no good for you. It may be hurting your emotional balance or your physical health. You wish to repair the damage to the relationship so you take steps to forgive. You begin to analyse the problem from the other person’s point of view or you simply decide to let the problem go. In either case, after an extended period of time, you are no longer angry and you have forgiven the person with whom you were angry. This process can be applied to anger by the offended person, the second person, a third party, or to life in general.

The third stage of forgiveness comes after you have seen the results of forgiveness when you choose to let go of your anger quickly. At this stage, the choice is to feel the hurt for a short period of time, and then work to either repair the relationship, or let go of seeing the situation as a problem. In either case, you decided to forgive because you have had chosen to practice it and have the benefit in your life. This could emerge as a situation of being cut off by another car on the expressway or in a complex situation like an affair in a marriage. At this stage, you are aware that the length of time you experience the grievance is primarily up to you to decide. The fourth stage of forgiveness involves the proactive choice to rarely get angry. This means to forgive in advance a specific offense that could trigger being hurt. This stage often emerges at the same time as some or all of the following thoughts; I do not want to waste my life in the discomfort caused by anger so I will choose to feel differently. I am able to forgive myself, forgive others, and forgive life and not to blame God.

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I know it hurts when people do not forgive me. I do not want to hurt other people by my anger so I will let it go.

Life is filled with incredible beauty and I am missing some if I am experiencing unresolved anger. I forgive myself for getting side-tracked. People do the best they can and if they err, I can best help them by offering understanding. The step in this process is to forgive the specific offense. Everyone, including myself, operates primarily out of self-interest. I must expect that sometimes, I will be annoyed by someone else's expression of their self-interest. If I can understand that this is an ordinary part of life, what is there to be upset about? If I understand that self-interest is the way that I act, how can I but offer forgiveness to everyone, including myself, for behaving that way? Not everyone will follow these four stages of forgiveness in an identical manner.

Some people we love so much that we are usually at stage four being open-hearted and ready to forgive. There are others by whom we feel we have been hurt so deeply that our supply of goodwill for them is almost dry, where we find it difficult to get past stage one. What you need to remember is the power of personal choice and the importance of exercising the choice to forgive so that we can bring peace and healing into our relationships and ourselves. Luskin (2002:13) notes that the "Hebrew and Greek for forgive means to pardon. It means to send away, to blot out, to lift up and carry away and to release from legal obligation." Jeremiah powerfully explains and depicts God's forgiveness when he says; "In those days and at that time, declares the Lord, the search will be made for the iniquity of Israel but there will be none and for the sins of Judah, but they will not be found, for I have pardon those whom I leave as a remnant." (Jeremiah 5:20).

When God forgives, you can send out a search party armed with radar, infrared scopes, and satellite reconnaissance photos, but they will not be able to find the sin God has removed. The parable of the unforgiving slave in Matthew 18 also gives us an important illustration on forgiveness. In the parable, the first slave owed the master a debt of trillions of Naira (or any currency readers may care to name). It was a debt impossible to repay. Nevertheless, when the slave begged his patience to allow repayment, the master went a step further. Matthew writes "And the Lord of the slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt," (Matthew 18:27). The master forgave and he released the slave from the legal obligation of that massive debt. The most graphic image of forgiveness in all the Scriptures is recorded in Colossians, "When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgression," (Colossians 2:13). Paul goes on to speak in verse fourteen saying, "Having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us, and He has taken it out on the cross." Here is the picture Paul was painting to give an illustration of God's forgiveness.

God had in His possession a legal document, "a certificate of debt" (Ephesians 2:15). On that certificate of debt were recorded decrees against every person. The word "decrees" had to do with God's law. God had, as it were, a piece of paper that listed every one of his laws that we had ever broken. What a horrifying thought! That certificate of debt detailed exactly what humans owed God. Anyone of those hostile decrees by itself would have cost human beings their lives and eternal punishment. The Greek word Paul used here could be translated "erased." The certificate recording our legal obligation to God was rubbed out. God's forgiveness is the cancellation of an unpayable debt that the guilty or offended owes to God. It is blotting out or the complete removal of the guilt of the offender. If this is how God forgives, is it possible to forgive other people from our heart?

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There is a New Testament verse that gives a strong command to forgive one another. It says, “Be kind and compassionate to one another; forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32). Christians are created in Christ Jesus for good works. People, whose lives are bounded by the Triune God, live and move in the domain of love. Christians are a people sealed by the Holy Spirit (4:30), beloved children of God who imitate their Father (5:1), and have been brought into the atoning sacrifice of Christ who gave Himself up for them (5:2). They must walk in love. The neighbor can be the victim of self-assertion as a result of anger (4:25, 26). Christians should impart grace (4:29), and be kind and tender hearted to forgive (4:32). Applying this biblical concept can lead to forgiveness as a practice in response to religious violence.

Forgiveness as a Practice in Response to Religious Violence

Over the years I have been a Christian. I have lived in the midst of religious violence from 2001 and until now. I have come to the conclusion that if you love people and get involved with them, you can count on it that they will disappoint, offend, betray, and/or hurt you. This is an unavoidable consequence of relating closely to people. Gradually, someone will have to make a choice, to either withdraw from close involvement with them, or learn how to forgive. This is one reason why Jesus and the apostles insisted that forgiveness is a central motif in Christian love. It is an expression of love, and it enables us to go on loving. Forgiveness is one of the most powerful and liberating dimensions of the Christian life, yet it can be confusing. “Be angry but do not sin” (Ephesians 4:26). There is such a thing as righteous anger. Nevertheless, there is the ever-present danger that it may turn into human spite. Forgiveness as a biblical model for restoring broken relationships is what Christians need to apply during any sort of violence. This can lead to forgiveness versus bitterness in conflict management. Paul says, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32). This is God’s solution to bitterness, which is associated with ‘rage and anger, brawling and slander’ together with every form of malice.

Bitterness is prolonged retributive anger towards another person because of an offense committed. Different kinds of offenses may occasion bitterness. Usually, the more intimate the relationship or the more heinous the offense, the more likely it is that you will struggle with bitterness against your offender. One may become bitter without even being offended personally. A person can “take up offense” for another person who is close to us and choose to hate people who may never ever have harmed us personally. Bitterness is choosing a response to offense. This explains why two people can experience the same offense, yet one becomes embittered while the other does not. The reason for this is not that the other person was more susceptible to bitterness than the other. Rather, the person chose to respond properly to the offense while the other chose to respond wrongly. This fact is painful to accept when you are bitter, but provides the path of liberation, as we shall discuss later.

What is the lie that bitter people believe? According to them, they have the right of retribution, the right to pay people back for their offenses. Deep within the human heart lies the awareness that somebody has to pay. We have a deep-seated conviction that people should pay for hurting others. The Creator, who hates sin because it offends His character and destroys the creatures He loves, has stamped this conviction into our hearts. It is wrong, however, for us to arrogate to ourselves the right to exert revenge because God reserves this right exclusively for himself. This is why Paul says, “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay says the

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Lord” (Romans 12:19, quoting Deuteronomy 32:35). When someone feels outraged over someone’s sin against us, we are operating on God’s righteousness. Yet, God says there is nothing like righteous anger without sinning in human life.

When a person chooses to pay people back for offenses committed against us, we are usurping God’s prerogative. We are playing God, which is even a more serious offense. By focusing inordinately on his offense, you magnify his bad qualities and gradually lose the ability to recognize his good qualities. I remember a female director at a government company who frustrated two of her most able employees until both of them resigned from the company. They said they were forced to resign because they were from a different ethnic group. However, she did not like them because there was anything wrong with the ethnic group to which they belonged. Rather, she assumed that they wanted to replace her as the leader (a perverted perception), despite the fact that they were from a marginalized group. Unfortunately, no matter how much effort we expend to hide it, bitterness causes us to express our right to take vengeance.

When God opens our eyes to see it, this can be extremely painful. A person rejoices when the offender fails or experiences adversity. Why? Because he or she is getting what he or she deserves. Conversely, we cannot rejoice when he or she succeeds or experiences prosperity. Instead, we get angry because he is unfairly getting off the hook. People of the Book have an inordinate desire to criticize the offender. When his name comes up in conversation, we feel a strong desire to say something negative. If the talk is already negative, we add to the negative comments in a way that the person is tainted beyond recognition. If the conversation is positive, we bring people back to reality by reminding people of his faults. This develops a radar-like sense for finding others who are bitter towards the same person.

There is a perverted but exquisite delight in commiserating with another like-minded hater over the wickedness of a common offender. Some bitter people devote much of their lives to fantasies of revenge. Such fantasies may simply involve giving an offender a good tongue-lashing, but others may lead to a violent attack. This is why Jesus connected hatred to murder. Usually, taking vengeance revolves in a variety of subtle ways. Some blow up over relatively minor issues that give them a “reason” to spew out their anger that has been brewing for months or years. Bitter people are hurting their offenders to pay them back, but tragic irony occurs. By taking vengeance, they hurt themselves far more than they hurt their offenders... Gary Delashmutt (1966:77) opines, “Harboring bitterness is like shooting yourself to hit your offender with the recoil of the gun!” Consider the consequences of usurping God’s prerogative. Bitterness can poison your emotional life. There is a connection between bitterness and depression. Many embittered people complain of chronic, unexplained depression. They no longer have the emotional resilience to adverse circumstances that they once had. God evidently designed us to have an emotional reservoir that acts as a buffer to adverse circumstances. A person can fill this emotional reservoir primarily by cultivating gratitude towards God and by practising love towards others.

By contrast harbouring bitterness, saps up much energy and places a real drain on our emotional reserves. Bitter people often find themselves easily depressed. When you become embittered towards another person, you usually think your bitterness negatively affects only that relationship. You think you can tolerate this sin in your life by isolating its destructive effects from those you hate. However, harbouring bitterness greatly impedes your ability to develop and sustain any healthy relationships. Some people seem to have a floating bitterness. Their bitterness, for example, is rooted in their attitude towards parents who

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repeatedly humiliated them. They may live a thousand miles away from their parents, yet flare up with incredible anger when anyone embarrasses them. This obviously impedes their ability to develop and sustain close friendships because embarrassment is inevitable. Long-term bitterness has a way of poisoning your personality negatively against people. Embittered people tend to become cynical and full of self-pity.

Over time, these destructive attitudes can affect the way people speak and carry themselves. Their voices are angry in tone, their faces hostile and their postures aggressive. Most of us have known people whose bearing communicates that they are deeply angry people. Tragically, such people tend to repel others and become more embittered against people for rejecting them. Most bitter people complain that their offenders have used their power to wrongly hurt or control their lives. In most cases, this is the truth. People in leadership, a domineering parent, or an abusive spouse have all used their position of authority or trust to take advantage of their victims. The tragic irony is bitterness perpetuates and increases our offender's control over us.

The more immersed we become in rehearsing their offense and expressing our revenge, the more we allow them to dominate our lives. This is why bitter people often become like their offenders in certain key ways. Humans are victimized by their abusive anger but then we become abusive in our own anger. We are victimized by their controlling behaviour, but then we become excessively controlling in our relationships with others. In a mysterious way, bitterness reduces us to the level of the people we hate. In usurping God's role to judge our offenders, we become like the very people we judge when we forget to abide by the biblical model to forgive from our hearts. The most precious privilege of a Christian life is enjoying the relationship with and closeness to a forgiving God who expects His followers to forgive from the heart.

While bitterness will not cause God to reject us, it will eventually rob us of the ability to enjoy our relationship with him. John warns. Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him. I John 2:9-11 are not talking about disliking a disagreeable Christian brother or sister. There will always be people we will not like as much as others. John's words focus on the attitude that causes us to ignore or despise others, to treat them as irritants, competitors, and or enemies. Christian love is not a feeling but a choice. We can choose to be concerned with people's wellbeing and treat them with respect, whether or not we feel affection towards them. If people choose to love others, God will help us express our love. Bitterness produces spiritual blindness because it is so profoundly hypocritical.

Christians are the recipients of incredible forgiveness. They are guilty before a holy God who has just cause to reject us and condemn us forever. Like the man in Jesus' parable, we expect to make others pay their debts to us while we have our own, greater debt forgiven. When opponents insist on the right to take vengeance on their offenders, and they need to deal away with retaliation want to enjoy the benefits of being forgiven by God. This double-mindedness is extreme. If people choose to retain our right to hate others, we forfeit the privilege of experiencing God's mercy and goodness. When we sever this crucial linkage between receiving God's forgiveness and extending it to others, we become spiritually paralyzed.

A Christian's life will shrivel away from what they once were when we allowed the wonder of God's mercy with us to spill out to others. Now what barriers are likely to hinder

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the proactive of the biblical model of forgiveness His word teaches? David W. Augsburger (1988:28) suggests that “There are only two barriers to forgiveness. One is an unwillingness, which is something each of us can change. The other is a misunderstanding of what biblical forgiveness is all about. Forgiveness can be confusing. Misunderstanding of Scripture and cultural misconceptions can distort its meaning. As we sharpen the focus on God’s biblical model of forgiveness, note the issues that have been misunderstood by you and which are the issues of unwillingness.” Some people try to deal with their bitterness by resorting to a form of popular determinism. The offender commits hurtful acts. Some do not want to hold them responsible. They seek to excuse the offender by saying that the offender is the victim of other people and circumstances. If we can convince ourselves that our offenders could not help what they did, we may not have to face the pain of the offense and the responsibility to forgive. This is a way of playing the ostrich; keeping our heads in the sand instead of dealing with the problem. God’s word agrees that our environment can influence us, but there is a crucial difference between influence and determinism. Christians have a basis for genuine empathy for even those who commit wrong. Because of the Fall, all of us have an inner inclination towards evil that makes us susceptible to external religious aggression.

Conclusion

Forgiveness involves the affective, cognitive and behavioural systems that are manifested in how a person forgives the offender and feels, thinks, and behaves towards him or her. According to psychological thinking, forgiveness is the absence of a negative effect, judgment and behaviour towards the perpetrator. However, forgiveness needs to integrate cognitive, effective behavioural and volitional, motivational, spiritual, religious and interpersonal approaches. Thus, the spiritual dimension of forgiveness is an important component of forgiveness as well as the volitional element. J. P. Pingleton (1993:23) explains that “The spiritual dimension of forgiveness is an important component of forgiveness and volitional element.” It is true that the volitional dimension in forgiveness plays an important role, yet to the human, our faculties are mobilized in forgiving others based on compassion, heart, intellect, judgment, imagination, and faith. Indeed, forgiveness is more than a substitution of hateful feelings with loving feelings.

For instance, a survivor of sexual abuse is likely to keep both the good and bad aspects of the perpetrator in view. If this happens, forgiveness will allow the survivor to absorb the full evil of the abuse that was committed against the person at the same time, not losing sight of the perpetrator. On the other hand, forgiveness in psychotherapy considers the cognitive dimensions in emotive aspects of dealing with hurt and resentment thinking it would heal hurts. There are others in the field of psychology who understand forgiveness as a wilful process in which the forgiver does not retaliate, rather he or she responds to the offender in a loving way. R.P. Walters affirms forgiveness as “a voluntary process that usually requires courage; multiple acts of the will to complete.

To forgive is to give up all claim on the offender including letting go of the emotional consequences of the hurt.” His view is interesting in the sense that the person who has been hurt has two alternatives—to be destroyed by resentment, which leads to death, or to forgive which leads to healing and life. Therefore, psychological literature tends to focus on the benefits of forgiveness for the forgiver and the role of forgiveness in the therapeutic and healing process. According to their theories, forgiveness is spiritual or transpersonal as well as interpersonal and put it that forgiveness has qualities that transcend one’s relationship with the person being forgiven and opens the forgiver to himself or herself and world in new ways.

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However, it is more than interpersonal quality. In this regard, psychologists speak of the experience of forgiveness in terms of its qualities of gift and grace which is often described as a bridge. But Biblical Christianity applies Scripture in using the teaching of Jesus not to take revenge. Rather repay evil with God as a solution to end all forms religious violence.

Recommendations

(1). Some people try to deal with their bitterness by resorting to a form of popular determination in counter religious violence. This study shows that forgiveness is not a superficial action, but it is God's initiative to restore shalom to all people who are experiencing religious violence. Just as bitterness poisons a person's emotional life, forgiving affects human relationship positively. Tender compassion may replace rage; desiring reconciliation replaces cold alienation. Forgiveness from the heart means waiving the right of focusing on past offenses as an excuse for hating the offender and plotting revenge. It also means choosing not to use the offenses against the person in the future as reminders, gossip, and other forms of retaliation.

The offenders' offenses may reoccur to you at times, but the motivation for doing so will not be retributive. L.B. Smedes (1984:18) notes that "It is the hardest trick in the whole of personal relationships because it leads healing, releases hurt, hatred and coming together to achieve the climax of reconciliation." J. Roger (1994:27) opines that "We don't really forgive when we still have the feeling of the memory of the hurt." This is the reason why B. Flanigan (1992:2,5,11,71,72,145) reiterates that "To choose to forgive means making the choice to release the injurer from debt, making the choice to cut the bonds that still hold you to the injurer, [and] making the choice to look ahead, not back.

Forgiveness is the method by which people in intimate relationship let each other off the hook for various acts of ruthlessness and unkindness." Thus, forgiveness means tolerating future injury from religious violence when it reoccurs. (2). God forbids vengeance taking of personal bitterness, but He acknowledges Christians to resort to credible policemen to protect them from thieves. While some people use the civil authorities to take vengeance on their enemies, Christians can seek to follow the steps of restoration (Romans 12:19-22; 13:4). (3). Authentic forgiveness as the mutual recognition through which repentance is genuine and right relationships are achieved. By this forgiveness is a synonym for reconciliation.

Laying down the right to take retribution and reassuming the responsibility to love are the first steps towards forgiveness, but until both parties have resolved their issues, repented of their sins, and restored their relationship, forgiveness has not occurred and reconciliation has not happened yet. While this view is commendable for its emphasis on restoring estranged relationships, it is incorrect. (4). Reconciliation is the restoration of relationship when both parties have resolved the enmity that separated them. It is always bilateral. Both parties must be willing to reconcile a broken relationship. Reconciliation is usually a product of forgiving from the heart, and forgiving from the heart is a condition for reconciliation. They are not the same thing. (5). Paul makes this distinction in the way God deals with us. He says through Christ's death, God extended forgiveness to all people ("not counting their sins against them"), even to those who are non-Christians. He goes on to appeal to those who have not yet received this forgiveness to "be reconciled to God," (II Corinthians 2:19, 5:20). Because God has extended forgiveness, reconciliation is possible, but it does not occur unless we choose to receive his forgiveness and thereby become reunited with Him. If we choose to continue in rebellion against Him, we deny His forgiveness in our lives.

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