

FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

by Richard Wang

translated by Peter Barry

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The God we believe in is a life-giving God, a God who loves us. He has bestowed his unconditional and boundless love in Jesus Christ. If we analyze God's love according to human experience, we call it compassionate and tolerant love, a love which heals our wounded hearts, and enriches our lives.

In this brief essay, we take as our starting point human forgiveness, and from there move on to divine forgiveness. In tracing the special characteristics of God's forgiving love, we shall also analyze our response through our acknowledgment of sin and repentance. Finally we shall touch upon the social nature of forgiveness, and how it affects our interpersonal relationships.

To acknowledge fault and seek forgiveness is part of the fabric of our daily lives. When a relationship is threatened, damaged or even severed by offensive words or deeds, it can only be repaired when the offending party acknowledges his transgression and the one offended reaches out to forgive him. While disruption of a relationship may be the act of but one person reconciliation demands the good will of all parties concerned.

It follows from this that both the acknowledgment of wrong doing and the willingness to forgive are requisite in restoring harmony to any human relationship. It is not enough to own up to one's wrongdoing; the offended party must also be willing to say to the offender: "Although you have caused me this harm, I am willing to receive you back in love." Note that a fundamental aspect of forgiving love is that it is always directed towards the wrong-doer. Where there is no sin, there is no need for forgiveness.

What then, in the final analysis, constitutes God's forgiving love? St. Paul has written: "All men have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God. All men are now justified by the gift of God, through the redemption wrought in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 3:23-24) Through these and

other verses scattered throughout the New Testament, we come to a fuller understanding of the special nature of God's loving forgiveness.

First and foremost, God's forgiveness is seen as antecedent to any movement of ours towards repentance. It precedes any action on our part to acknowledge our sin and ask for pardon. It is God who takes the initiative by sending His Son Jesus Christ into the world as our saviour and redeemer. The Father has also willed that the Son take upon himself the dire consequences of sin, namely, suffering and death. All of this Jesus accepted, offering himself in expiation for sin, while at the same time unceasingly interceding for us before His Father that our sins might be forgiven. In the person of Jesus Christ, God our Father declares us innocent and forgives all our sins prior to any action on our part to seek his pardon. Moreover, the Father has raised Jesus Christ from the dead as an everlasting sign and symbol of his forgiveness, conferring on us a share in his divinity and the hope of eternal life. Therefore, whenever we turn to the Father in a spirit of repentance, the forgiveness we receive is that which has already been bestowed on mankind in the person of Jesus.

Another characteristic of God's forgiveness is its scope and latitude. Divine forgiveness is at the same time universal, reaching out to all men in every age, and particular, insofar as it is directed towards and touches each individual person.

The loving forgiveness offered to us by the Father in Jesus Christ is also a forgiveness that is unconditional and free from any blame or censure. The parables of Jesus found in the fifteenth chapter of the Lucan Gospel illustrates this aspect most beautifully. When the shepherd after much anxiety and searching finds his lost sheep, far from resorting to criticism or imputing blame, he immediately calls his neighbours together to rejoice with him that his sheep has been found. This same attitude is evident in the father of the prodigal, who runs out to meet his son upon his return and embraces him with great tenderness. He neither reprimands nor passes judgement on what his son has done, but rather gives a banquet that all in his house may celebrate his return to life.

Jesus came to proclaim his Father's forgiveness. He did this not only by his words but also in his actions. And he strongly urged his followers to follow his example, calling upon the sinner to forgive in turn his neighbour and be reconciled with him as a condition for receiving God's grace. Reconciliation with God and with each other is an essential feature of the Good News and central to all that Jesus

taught.

After this brief consideration of divine forgiveness, let us now turn to the process of reconciliation as it passes through the various stages of sin, acknowledgment of wrong-doing, and final restoration to God's love.

The Book of Genesis describes man's fall from grace in the following manner. Man, desiring to be like God in knowing good and evil, eats the fruit from the forbidden tree, the tree of knowledge, and thereby commits sin (Gen. 3:5). What is the underlying meaning here? When God created man in his own image and likeness, he also created him with a specific human nature. This human nature, while reflecting the divine, has its own inner structure, which also constitutes the basis for his ethical behaviour. The accidental differences of race, culture and social situation aside, this nature is common to all men; and, according to the general understanding of most, to act in harmony with one's human nature is to do good while to act contrary to it is to do evil. Thus we can say that God in creating human nature already determined the fundamental moral principles by which it is to be guided. When we deliberately refuse to be guided by these inner ethical principles and rebel against them, seeking instead to establish our own moral guidelines according to our own perceptions of what we need, then we usurp the divine prerogative to judge what is good and evil. Not content with being made in God's image and likeness, we set ourselves up as gods in judging for ourselves what is good or evil.

A simple example may help to explain this concept. When I steal something from someone else, I am motivated by a personal need to have that which does not belong to me. My perception of what is good for me overrides the God-given ethical principle of respect for the property of others. Again, when I harbour a dislike for someone, I perceive him not as he is but as a threat or obstacle in my path. I may then use every possible means to dispose of him, from humiliation and ridicule to actually taking his life. In doing so, I pay no regard to the universal moral principle of respect for life, but rather, motivated by self-interest, I set up as the principle of my action all that serves my own personal advantage. In this way, I become the arbiter of good and evil, a god unto myself.

In the Old Testament, God gave the Ten Commandments to the children of Israel as guidelines for ethical behaviour. The first three outline our obligations towards God, while the remaining seven are concerned with how we are to treat our fellow human beings. The latter includes

respect for human life and for property rights, regard for human sexuality and mutual trust between people. When Jesus was asked which of the commandments was the greatest, He said it was to "love God above all things and our neighbour as ourselves". Thus, Jesus established a new commandment which was the fulfillment of the "whole law and the prophets".

With Jesus' commandment of love, human nature also receives its ultimate guideline for its own moral fulfillment. When man sins, he frustrates his own personal development, arresting the process of moral and spiritual maturation which has been ordained by God for the perfection of his human nature. When he makes selfishness the standard of his behaviour, he is refusing to love, and in refusing to love he withdraws more and more into himself, closing himself off from the avenues of his own spiritual growth.

The above is a summary of the basic elements we find in all sin. Sin, no matter whether it be seen as individual or social, always seeks purely personal advantage. Ultimately, all sin is a form of selfishness. It arises when individuals or groups absolutize their own perceived needs over and above the good of others. A natural result of such self-seeking is the disruption it causes in human relationships. But selfish actions should not be viewed solely from their social effects alone, for such activity also affects the very core of the individual personality. A person who moves further away from love and deeper into sin experiences a diminishing of his inner freedom and a gradual waning of strength in his ability to reach out in love to his fellow man. Experience teaches us that one who freely and willingly espouses a life of selfishness,...he who is "confirmed in his sin"... will find it very difficult to turn back in repentance. However, for most people it is more a matter of struggling with the day-to-day temptations that arise from personal pressure or weakness of character. Here sin is accompanied by inner conflict and privation of inner peace. Generally speaking, repentance comes easier for such people.

"God has shown his love for us in this way, that while we were still sinners Christ already died for us." (Rom. 5:8). This passage once again affirms the antecedent nature of God's love for us. According to our Christian faith, the reason we are able to repent of our sins at all is not through any strength of our own, but through the grace which God has given us in Jesus Christ. While we may be capable of making a personal decision to reject love, when we recognize the wrongness of our behaviour, we soon discover we are not capable of restoring ourselves to an unselfish manner of living. We lack the

spiritual capability to re-open for ourselves the door to life. For this we need the help of God's grace.

How does God's saving grace enter the lives of repentant sinners? Generally speaking, there are three different routes. The first is through the emotions or feelings. This happens when we feel we have reached a dead end, and that our sins have led us into a hopeless quandary. Coming to our senses we realize that we have followed the wrong path and desire to return to our Father. This was the path of the prodigal son of Luke's Gospel. The second route is the way of reason. The sinner is given some kind of intellectual insight, perhaps through a homily or some other means, into the truth of his situation. This leads him to realize the destructive nature of his selfishness and moves him to repent of his sinful ways. The third route is the way of the heart. God's love touches the sinner's heart directly, prompting him to realize the evilness of his selfishness and feel remorse for the deprivation of God's love. This too can move him to repentance. No matter what route God's saving grace may take to enter our lives, the process of reconciliation is a continuous struggle before it can reach its final term. In the first stage, as we try to acknowledge our wrongdoing, complicated feelings may be stirred up in our heart--feelings of shame, remorse or guilt. Secondly, we feel the strong pull of selfishness even as we seek to abandon old habits. We discover how unwilling we are to surrender what we perceive as beneficial and advantageous for ourselves. Finally, although we cooperate with God's grace and earnestly try to overcome our faults, we still must confront those to whom our sin has caused harm. And we cannot be certain of their willingness to forgive us, whether or not they will receive us back in love. During this period of our struggle, along with God's grace, each of us needs the acceptance, support and encouragement of another human being as an instrumental part of the reconciliation process. When we have experienced God's forgiveness and the forgiving love of those we have harmed, we shall find in them the courage to abandon our sinful ways and face up to the difficulties involved in true repentance. Most notably, we shall then make every effort to repair the harm caused by our sins.

The prayer that Jesus taught us contains the words: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us." The meaning is clear; in the measure and manner we forgive others, so too will God forgive us. This does not deny the antecedent nature of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ. It merely expresses the truth that in an unforgiving heart, there is no room to receive God's forgiveness which is constantly being offered to us. Other passages in the New Testament

describe this in another way. They speak of having received God's loving forgiveness in Christ, we then turn in loving forgiveness to those who have sinned against us. From either point of view, Jesus requires of all those who follow Him the unconditional forgiveness of others as a response to the mercy shown them by God.

Regarding the acknowledgment of wrong-doing, the forgiveness of sin and reconciliation between persons, we can speak of this in two ways. Generally speaking, it is more difficult to acknowledge our sins to another person than it is to God, if for no other reason than that God's presence is within us and unseen, while our neighbour is outside us and very visible. Further, God's loving forgiveness is unconditional and non-judgmental; whereas man's forgiveness is in most cases conditional, usually judgmental, and often not very accepting...sometimes there is even the refusal to forgive. Therefore, to acknowledge our sins before others and to ask for their forgiveness usually involves a heart-wrenching inner struggle.

On the other hand, to forgive others from the heart can also be personally quite difficult and painful. It is no easy matter to forgive. As the saying goes: "To err is human, to forgive divine." Often, the hate and anger produced in our hearts by the harm done to us makes us unwilling to forgive. Some of us think that to forgive unconditionally is to leave ourselves open to further harm; others, while willing, may not feel able to forgive for the harm done them has been so great and they feel that they no longer have the strength to offer forgiveness. In my years of pastoral work, it has been my experience that a readiness to forgive those who cause us harm is the most salutary attitude open to us. If we are unwilling to forgive and continue to harbour thoughts of revenge, there is no real difference between our attitude and that of our enemy except in the order of procedure. On the other hand, if I strive to act in accordance with Christ's teaching, asking His help in forgiving others, my heart will open itself to receive his love, and his love will not only give me the strength to forgive but also help undo the suffering and harm caused by the sin. Once we make up our minds to forgive, we release from our hearts the burden of revenge.

Our willingness to forgive must also be antecedent as our Father's is. Nor should it have as a condition our enemy's willingness to repent. Even if he remains adamant we can still ask Jesus to give us the strength to forgive him, and ask God to forgive him as well. This is the quickest and surest way to gain peace of mind and heart. This kind of antecedent unconditional forgiveness can also go a long way in

influencing our enemy to acknowledge his fault and will make future reconciliation all the more possible.

Confronted by sinful humanity, God's response is forgiveness in Jesus Christ. And this same kind of forgiveness is also what Christ requires of His followers. Only through the forgiving of sins is true reconciliation possible. Acknowledgment of sin, forgiveness and reconciliation are the best prescriptions that God provides to cure our wounded hearts, to heal the divisions between us and to repair the harm done to others by our sins. Being the recipients of God's loving forgiveness in Jesus Christ, we must cooperate with His grace by a willingness to acknowledge our own wrong doing and be ready to forgive those who have sinned against us. In this way, we will help to build a society of lasting happiness and peace. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God."

BOOK NOTICE

Zwischen Autonomie und Anlehnung, Die Problematik der katholischen Kirche theologisch und geschichtlich gesehen (Autonomy and Dependence, Theological and Historical Problems of the Catholic Church in China), Editors Roman Malek and Werner Prawdzik, 1989, 203 pages, price DM 35, available from: Steyler Verlag Wort und Werk, Bahnhofstrasse 9, 4054 Nettetal 2, W. Germany

This book, written in German, is a collection of papers and resolutions of the "China Colloquium" held in November, 1987 in Sankt Augustin (near Bonn), West Germany. The Colloquium was the joint project of the College of Philosophy and Theology of the Divine Word Missionaries and Monumenta Serica, a journal of oriental studies. Nine papers presented by Church-in-China observers make up the content of the first section of the book. These papers deal with the complicated situation of the Catholic Church in China from a theological, canonical and historical point of view. The second section contains the resolutions adopted by the 40 participants at the Colloquium, along with documentation, e.g. the Constitutions of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and Catholic Church Administrative Commission. The third section is comprised of sermons, meditations and appropriate material for the Liturgy of the Word when praying for the Church in China. Finally, Roman Malek has put together a 36 page bibliography, listing the most important books and articles on the Church in China published since 1949. Those interested in the Catholic Church in China will find the book both absorbing and useful.