



**SCRIPTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON
FORGIVENESS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE CLINICAL PRACTICE OF
SOCIAL WORK AND RELATED CLINICAL PROFESSIONS**

By: Nicholas Placido

**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2016
November, 2016
Cincinnati, OH**

Scriptural and Theological Perspectives on
Forgiveness and Its Impact on the Clinical Practice of
Social Work and Related Clinical Professions

Asbury University

Nicholas Placido

Abstract

This paper provides a beginning investigation into various theological and Scriptural perspectives on the dynamics of forgiveness. Several Scriptural texts and the writings of various early church fathers and reformers were reviewed in relationship to this subject. The exploration concludes with a review of current psychological and social work literature that pertain to forgiveness. This narrative is an initial attempt from which to bridge Scriptural and theological principles of forgiveness with the clinical practice of social work and related clinical professions.

Introduction

The following is intended to provide an initial investigation into Scriptural and various theological perspectives on forgiveness. To that end, an initial review of several Scriptural texts in their relationship to the subject will be completed. This will be followed by a review of the writings of various early church fathers and reformers in relationship to forgiveness. This exploration will conclude with a review of current psychological and social work literature that discusses forgiveness. This narrative is not intended to be exhaustive in nature, but rather a beginning from which to bridge Scriptural and theological principles of forgiveness with the clinical practice of psychology and social work.

Scriptural Perspective

While the concept of forgiveness is found throughout Scripture, it must be noted that it is not just limited to living in right relationship to our neighbor. The concept of forgiveness was initially modeled by God in His forgiveness of humanity. “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him” (Psalms 32:1, NIV). The concept of forgiveness and its practical outcome began and is continually modeled by the Creator Himself. “You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins. You set aside all your entire wrath and turned from your fierce anger” (Psalm 85:2, 3, NIV). Here we see that a holy God who has the right to be angry with His creation, set that aside and attempted to be reconciled with humanity.

While this provides humanity a model for forgiving others, it also reminds us that we have been offensive to God, and are in need of forgiveness ourselves. It provides a humbling perspective which should motivate us in our relationships with others. “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you”

(Ephesians 4:32, NIV). We are reminded of humanity's pardon by God, and this provides perspective on our dealings with others. "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievance you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13, NIV). We see from this verse that all of humanity is in need of forgiveness, which is provided by God. This provides not only reconciliation with God, but a model and motivation for our interaction and forgiveness with others.

Spiritual Dynamics of Forgiveness

Not only does Scripture portray forgiveness as provided by God, but that its implementation can affect our relationship with Him. "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14, 15, NIV). While the interpretation of this verse will vary in different Christian traditions, it is clear that our relationship with others greatly impacts our relationship to God. This dynamic is two-sided in nature. A positive forgiving attitude to others lends itself to a positive interaction with God, while an unforgiving perspective greatly curtails that dynamic. This principle is highlighted in Christ's parable of the unfaithful servant in Matthew 18. In this parable a servant owed his king a great debt which he was unable to pay. Scripture states that the "servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go" (Matthew 18:27, NIV). The servant had another man who also owed him a debt. But instead of following the model of his king, the servant refused to forgive the debt, and took punitive action. When the king became aware of this, he placed the servant in jail until the debt was paid. The parable ends with this admonition. "This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart" (Matthew 18:35, NIV). Clearly, we

can see from this text that our attitude and actions regarding forgiveness can greatly enhance or hinder our fellowship with God.

Relational Dynamics of Forgiveness

Not only does our approach to forgiveness significantly impact our relationship with our Creator, but also with our fellow creatures. Many times in the Scriptures forgiveness is utilized to enhance the relationship between two adversaries. The results are not only blessing for these individuals, but for future generations. Possibly one of the most significant examples of forgiveness is found in the life of Joseph. He was, as a young man, thrown into a well, and eventually sold into slavery in Egypt. While there, his master's wife lied about his behavior and he was placed in prison. Furthermore, while in prison he asked two of his fellow prisoners who were about to be released to remember him before the king. They heartily agreed, but appeared to forget about Joseph the minute they were released. Even though Joseph was eventually remembered and brought to great power, we see that Joseph was able to forgive those that had mistreated him. This can be most clearly seen when Joseph must confront his brothers who sold him into slavery. "But Joseph said to them, 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended for good'" (Genesis 50:19, NIV). Even though Joseph held great power in Egypt, he recognized his place before God, and forgave his brothers. His action not only provided reconciliation with those individuals, but provided a means of assistance to the people and their descendants. What a significant difference would have occurred in the lives of the people if Joseph had not forgiven them and provided for their needs.

The relationship one has with others is significant in that individual's spiritual life. The need for forgiveness and reconciliation is seen as a priority in the worship and service of God. The Scripture states that "if you are offering your gift at the altar and then remember that your

brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First, go and be reconciled to your brother” (Matthew 5:23, 24, NIV). The importance of forgiveness and the resulting reconciliation is so significant that the individual is exhorted to attend to that before performing this important act of worship. The priority of utilizing forgiveness in the maintenance of relationships with others is highly valued. Furthermore, it appears that God requires that our relationships with our “brother” be reconciled in order to provide an acceptable “gift” to Him.

Forgiveness not only benefits our worship of God, it can provide restoration to the one who has offended. In II Corinthians, Paul discusses the appropriate response to “if anyone be caused grief” (II Corinthians 2:5, NIV). He urges the believers “to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (II Corinthians 2:7, NIV). The place of forgiveness here appears to be redemptive in nature. It is possible that the application of forgiveness to the offender keeps them from experiencing such severe distress and allows for the possibility of reconciliation and restoration. Perhaps, this dynamic only allows for the reconciliation of the offender by preventing bitterness that could inhibit personal healing.

The Scripture also discusses the use of forgiveness as a means of bringing conviction upon the offending party. In Proverbs, we are admonished to care for our enemy that “in doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads” (Proverbs 25:22, NIV). While the verse has not specifically used the word forgiveness, it is implied in caring for one’s enemy. One cannot care for an adversary until they set aside those “things” which they are holding against the other person. Such action leads to the “burning” of conviction which could lead an enemy to reconsider their position, which could lead to reconciliation.

Also, the exercise of forgiveness can be effective in reflecting the nature of God as seen in the actions of believers. As Christians, we are called to be models of God's grace to others. Through expressing forgiveness, we are reflective of a significant aspect of His nature. The Gospel calls us to love our "enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you might be sons of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:44, 45, NIV). Such an approach in dealing with one's enemies strongly establishes the connection between the grace and love of God and the manner in which we interact with others. In fact, I John uses strong language in approaching this subject. "Anyone who claims to be in the light, but hates his brother is still in darkness" (I John 2:9, NIV). Those who "walk in the light" have a relationship with others that is evidenced by love and forgiveness. The ability to forgive is highly significant in being reflective of the grace and love of God.

The Nature and Quality of Forgiveness

The Scriptures also address the nature and quality of forgiveness. Jesus was asked by Peter "how many times shall I forgive a brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:22, NIV). Jesus' response was "I tell you not seven times, but seventy-seven" (Matthew 18:22, NIV). In some translations the number seventy-seven is interpreted as being seventy times seven or 490 times. However one interprets the number, it clearly denotes the quality of forgiveness as patient and continuous in nature. Some would argue that the choice of the number by Jesus was a response to Peter's quote. If Peter had used the number nine would Jesus have said ninety times nine? It appears that Jesus is calling us to repeatedly extend forgiveness. The nature of forgiveness allows one to respond to those who offend you in ways that are unusual for the human condition. Christians are told to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27, NIV). Without the ability to forgive, it would be virtually

impossible to obey this commandment in the manner in which God intended. Forgiveness leaves room for God to work and deal with offenders in His way and time. “Do not take revenge, my friend, but leave room for God’s wrath” (Romans 12:19, NIV). This is a position of allowing God to work in the life of the individual and trusting that in exercising this grace He does not forfeit their growth. Indeed, the response of Scripture appears to be a test of returning a blessing to those who have offended. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil by doing good” (Romans 12:21, NIV).

Our response to those who offend us not only reflects the nature of God’s forgiveness, but the maturity and attitude of the individual. In Proverbs, it states that “a man’s wisdom gives him patience; it is his glory to overlook an offense” (Proverbs 19:1, NIV). The ability of one to forgive speaks volumes of the spiritual development of the individual. To be able to appropriately and scripturally forgive denotes a person of maturity and reflects that which is best in that individual. We are also reminded by Scripture, because of our standing before God, to maintain a spirit of forgiveness. We are to “speak and act as those who are going to be judged” (James 2:12, NIV). While we have been justified by the work of Christ, we are reminded of our accountability to God, and our need to reflect His grace to others.

Taylor (1956), in his study of the New Testament regarding forgiveness and reconciliation, does not feel that forgiveness is necessarily equivalent to reconciliation, but rather the “action directed to the removal or annulment of some obstacle or barrier to reconciliation” (p.3). He portrays it as that which opens the possibility of reconciliation. However, the author feels that Scripture conveys that certain conditions lead to appropriate forgiveness. One of the most essential “conditions of forgiveness is repentance” (Taylor, 1956, p.7). Often this action refers to our relationship to God. In the Epistles and Acts, forgiveness “is thought of almost

exclusively as the divine forgiveness” (Taylor, 1956, p. 8). However, Taylor (1956) points out that while in the sayings of Jesus the need for divine forgiveness is clearly portrayed, “greater emphasis is laid on the duty of forgiving others” (p. 15).

We have briefly reviewed a few Scripture passages relating to the nature of forgiveness. The content of Scripture is more than could be contained in many volumes. But hopefully, it will be useful in providing a foundation from which we can continue to explore this subject.

The Perspective of the Early Church Fathers and the Reformers

The early Church fathers and Church reformers did not always speak directly to the subject of forgiveness. However, they frequently wrote about the ways in which believers should treat others, how one handles their own emotions or behavior.

Augustine

For Augustine (n.d.), this over-reaching principle of the Christian life is love, which provides the motivation to behave in a moral manner with others. He stated that “every commandment harkens back to love” (p. 1). Moral behavior and actions are viewed as “rightly obeyed only when they are measured by the standard of our love of God and our love of our neighbor in God” (Augustine, n.d., p. 1). Not only is the love of God the standard for Christian living and forgiveness, but it is the empowerment to complete it as well. Because of the Fall, Augustine viewed humanity’s ability to maintain godly standards as greatly curtailed, unless enabled by the grace of God. Augustine felt that Christ grants the individual a “grace of Charity” (Burns, 1989, p. 13) and that such a “charity also moves a person to the love of neighbor, and of the good works which God commands” (p.14). The dynamic of the divine relationship impacts the way believers conduct their lives and relationship to others. Augustine is often quoted as saying “love God and do what you will” (Atkinson, Field, Holmes, & O’Donovan, 1995, p. 418).

However, the remainder of the quote states “Let love’s root be within you, and from that root nothing but good can come” (Atkinson et. al., 1995, p. 418). Christian living is a response to the love God has shared with us. In loving God and seeking after Him, one will be directed to consider the perspective and work of God in and with our neighbor.

Luther

While much of Luther’s writings were devoted to God’s model of forgiveness in the work of Christ, he does discuss ways in which Christians should treat others, and deal with their emotional responses. For example, being angry at an individual is only appropriate under certain conditions. It is acceptable for God to be angry due to His divine nature and for those “who are in the place of God,” (“Luther”, Bente & Daw, Trans.,1921, p. 1) such as governmental authorities or parents. “For it is proper for God and for everyone who is in a divine estate to be angry, to reprove and punish” (“Luther”, 1921, p. 1). Anger was seen as corrective, but only in the hands of those who have the appropriate authority to exercise it. In general, Luther felt that “God’s ultimate purpose” (“Luther”,1921, p. 3) as to show kindness to others, specifically to those who are our enemies. In so doing, we are reflective of the goodness of God.

Luther viewed his approach to forgiving our neighbor as being both internal and external in nature. He states that “we learn to calm our wrath, and to have a gentle heart, especially to them who give us cause to be angry, that is, our enemies” (“Luther”, 1921, p. 2). But this inward discipline should lead to an outward working of good works and proper behavior. In dealing with one’s enemies one should “speak well of him, do good to him, and not intend any evil against him” (“Luther”, Spaeth, Reed, & Jacob, 1915, p. 1). The inward discipline and outer manifestations were seen as working together in maintaining commitment and love to God, while “protecting one’s neighbor from injustice or injury” (“Luther”, 1915, p. 2). Luther states

it concisely when he writes that one should “set his enemy before him, keep him constantly before the eyes of his heart, as an exercise whereby he may curb his spirit and train his heart to think kindly of his enemy, wish him well, care for him and pray for him, and then, when opportunity offers, speak well of him and do good to him” (“Luther”, 1915, p. 2). Both the working of the heart and its overflow into good works were seen as significant in dealing with the dynamics and effort of forgiveness in human relationships.

Calvin

Calvin proposed a Christian life in which one has the duty of seeking the good of one’s neighbor. “How can you exhibit the work of charity which Paul described unless you renounce yourself and become wholly devoted to others?” (“Calvin”, Beveridge, Trans., 1845, p. 5) Calvin stressed the importance of serving others and being in a right relationship to them. Indeed, one was to place the affairs of someone else above their own. Whatever an individual was able to do, he was “bound to do for his brother, not considering his own interest in any other way than by sharing earnestly for the common edification of the Church” (“Calvin”, 1845, p. 6). One was called not just to consider your neighbor’s needs equal to your own, but to make your own “subordinate” (“Calvin”, 1845, p. 6) to your neighbor’s. Calvin felt that “we are not to look to what men in themselves deserve, but to attend to the image of God, which exists in all, and to whom we owe all honor and love” (“Calvin”, 1845, p. 6). Thus, because individuals are representatives of God, they should be treated accordingly. Even those who mistreat you should be treated with love because it is what the Lord deserves. This is done by not reflecting “on the weakness of men, but looking to the image of God in them” (“Calvin”, 1845, p. 6-7). In a sense, we are to extend mercy and show forgiveness to our enemies by recalling who we are and our neighbors are, in relation to the creative work of God. We are reminded that interfacing with our

neighbors is more than temporal, having an important and eternal element. We extend forgiveness because forgiveness has been extended to us, and because our neighbor is made in God's image.

While it must be acknowledged that much of Calvin's writings focused on God's work and forgiveness in the history of humanity, he does stress the importance of right relationship with one's neighbor, and viewing them as creations of God on whom He has placed His image.

Clinical Perspectives and Issues

We have explored forgiveness from Scriptural and theological perspectives. We will now attempt to review the subject in its application to the clinical practice of psychology and social work and their integration with faith. To that end, the defining of forgiveness, the study of its dynamics, issues faced in therapy, and the integration of faith and practice will be reviewed.

Definitions of Forgiveness

The process of defining what forgiveness is can vary with the sources of reference which are utilized. Taylor (1956) notes that the meaning of forgiveness in the New Testament is usually denoted as "the removal of barriers to reconciliation," (p. 23) while modern theology relates it to "full restoration to fellowship" (p. 23). The author feels that our modern view regarding the nature of forgiveness has been greatly impacted by other disciplines outside the scope of theology. "The modern idea of forgiveness is closely related to our conceptions of personality as they have been developed by the study of philosophy and psychology" (Taylor, 1956, p. 25). The general population may tend to view forgiveness as limited and requiring repentance, while some clergy "view repentance as unnecessary, although it can facilitate forgiveness" (Macaskill, 2005, p. 1261). Clearly, the professions of social work and psychology have affected the ways our culture and profession views forgiveness. But, has it helped to define

it? “Because of the confusion in defining forgiveness and the controversy over when forgiveness should be used, it is essential that therapists develop conceptual and clinical clarity for themselves and for their clients” (Walton, 2005, p. 196).

Perhaps one way of defining forgiveness is to state what it is not. McMinn (1996) has delineated five “imposters” to the real aspects of forgiveness. First, the author states that “forgiveness is often confused with excusing” (p.206) the offense of the individual. Excusing tends to minimize the scope of the offense, while forgiveness realizes the severity and extends pardon. Secondly, forgiveness has often been viewed as a denial or passive acceptance of the incident. This approach tends to take a passive view of the process, while forgiveness is usually a very active choice and direction taken by the offended party. Thirdly, it can wrongly be seen as ascribing fault to one’s self. “Forgiveness is not self-blame” (McMinn, 1996, p. 207). It sees the offense of another and appropriately ascribes blame. It does not look around the offense, but rather directly at it. Fourthly, forgiveness can too strongly be associated with the remorse of the offender. This view leads one to extend pardon based on the offender’s reaction, or may ascribe forgiveness is truly genuine based on the reaction of the individual. Finally, the author feels that “forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same” (McMinn, 1996 p. 207). Hopefully, forgiveness will lead to restoration with another, but if it does not, that does not diminish its intent.

Similar ideas are conveyed by Gary Thomas (2000), in which he quotes Enright’s views of “what forgiveness is not” (p. 41). It is seen as not being (1) forgetting, (2) reconciliation, (3) condoning, (4) dismissing or (5) pardoning. The author feels that many of these views minimize the role of time, remove the personal nature of forgiveness, or see the process as insignificant. He goes on to discuss that there may be “degrees of forgiveness” (Thomas, 2000, p. 45) to consider in our defining of forgiveness. Forgiveness may be “detached” in that there is a

“reduction of negative feelings” but “no reconciliation has taken place” (Thomas, 2000, p. 45). It can also be “limited” in that a diminishing of negative affect with only a partial restoration to the relationship with the individual occurs. The highest degree of forgiveness is “full” when a “total cessation of negative feelings” occurs and the “relationship is restored and grows” (Thomas, 2000, p. 45). While we have explored various aspects which delineate the range of forgiveness, we have not attempted to define it specifically.

The New Dictionary of Christian Ethics views forgiveness as “the mutual recognition that repentance of either or both parties is genuine and that the relationship has been restored or achieved” (Atkinson, 1995, p. 389). Three requirements are brought forth as necessary to be considered genuine. First, there must be a “restoration of an attitude of love” (Atkinson, 1995, p. 389) by the party who was offended. Secondly, there must be a “working through of the pain and anger” (Atkinson, 1995, p. 389) one experiences in the process, and finally the process must allow “an opening of future appropriate relating” (Atkinson, 1995, p. 389). This definition may be useful in that it focuses on the necessity of an appropriate attitude, allows room for processing of emotions usually associated with the process, and views forgiveness as the possibility of future restoration. While the definition above speaks to the attitude and direction which are part of this process, it does not delineate other aspects of forgiveness. “Forgiveness is an act of the will that seeks wholeness and opens oneself to the expansive process of change and transformation” (Cunningham, 1985, p. 149). This denotes that to forgive another is a choice. A choice that is often costly, especially to the one extending pardon. It involves transformation not just in the offended, but also in the heart of one who has been forgiven. It would take much more time than is allowed in this brief exploration to define and delineate the nature and scope of forgiveness. Many volumes have and could be written simply deciding what the nature of this

process is. However, now let us look at a few of the dynamics which surround this implementation.

The Benefits of Forgiveness

When examining the dynamics of forgiveness, it must be noted that it can be beneficial to the forgiving party. While women tend to score higher on measures of empathy, there is no general difference “in gender regarding overall forgiveness” (Macaskill, Maltby, & Day, 2002, p. 664). Individuals with higher levels of empathy “find it easier to work towards forgiveness of other...” (p. 664). Thomas (2000) notes several studies in which college students who underwent a course of forgiveness education experienced “improved self-esteem, hope and lowered trait anxiety” (p. 40). A similar study cited by the author “found a significant decrease in depression and anxiety” (p. 40) among elderly females who participated in a similar program. Greater levels of forgiveness between parents “predicts more expressiveness in the family, less family conflict, and more family cohesiveness” (Maio, Thomas, Fincham, & Carnelley, 2008, p. 316). It is also important to note in understanding the working of forgiveness that it must be viewed as a process as well as a choice.

Cunningham (1985), who was quoted earlier as affirming the willfulness of forgiveness, also portrays it as a four stage process of (1) judgment versus denial, (2) humility versus humiliation, (3) opportunity of mutuality and negative and (4) mutual experience of healing and reconciliation. The initial stage is one in which the offended individual must appropriately judge the offender, and open “oneself to the resolution that has occurred” (p. 144). This is followed by the tension between the humility which calls one to forgive, and accepting the humiliation of the offense. It is after this that the opportunity for change can begin in both parties. This process reaches fulfillment in the final stage in which the “actual living out of the forgiveness process”

(Cunningham, 1985, p. 145) takes place. It is important to consider that the process of forgiveness is one that has its fuller impact over time. Finkel, Rusbolt, Kumashiro & Hannon (2002) indicate that while the initial reactions to betrayal can be harsh, reactions tend to soften over time.

Malcolm and Greenberg (2000) delineated five components that appear essential in the forgiveness process – acceptance and awareness of strong emotions, the letting go of unmet interpersonal needs, a shift in the view of the offender, development of empathy for the offender, and construction of new narratives of the self and others (p. 179). Finally, the motivation one might hold which leads to forgiveness can vary. In a study of twenty evangelical individuals, five categories of motivation were noted: (1) comfort, (2) duty, (3) relationship, (4) humility/empathy, and (5) Christian beliefs (McMinn et. al., 1999, p. 189). While many of the subjects voiced a reasoned approach to their response, others were motivated by the obligation to follow the example of Christ. The other findings in this study indicate that “most respondents gave additional motives beyond the distinctly Christian motives described previously” (p.195). In exploring the process of forgiveness, this is helpful in understanding that people appear to have multiple reasons they choose to forgive.

Therapeutic Applications

The therapeutic utilization of forgiveness has been viewed from different perspectives in the practice of psychology and social work. One possible view of its application is completely opposite to its use in therapy. It is felt that this approach provides a “false sense of moral obligation” (McMinn, 1996, p. 209) and may be significantly detrimental to the therapeutic process. Those with this perception maintain that such an approach minimizes the pain the individual has faced. They “view forgiveness to be utterly ridiculous or infeasible in the light of

the harm suffered by the client” (Meeks & McMinn, 1997, p. 53). Another view holds that utilization of a therapeutic technique can be useful in promoting mental health. The focus here is to “alleviate inner discomfort and relational conflicts” (p. 54). The emphasis in this perspective is simply the application of forgiveness as a clinical tool which can help the process of emotional healing.

In contrast to this, the final perspective views forgiveness as an extension of one’s Christian duty. A study of highly religious social work practitioners appears to indicate a more favorable attitude toward the concept of forgiveness than their less religious counterparts. (DiBlasio, 1993). Forgiveness has long been a part of the historical and theological tradition of people of faith. Therefore, it seems to be highly important “to understand forgiveness as an extension of theological understanding” (p. 56). Meeks and McMinn (1997) advocate a clear understanding of all three perspectives in the development of “a responsible Christian model of forgiveness” (p. 57). It is important to understand the powerful clinical tool forgiveness can be. However, it must be held in the context of its historical roots and personal development of the individual client. Furthermore, it should be recognized that such a dynamic can provide great harm if handled inappropriately.

Applications of Forgiveness in Christian Clinical Practice

In appropriately applying and integrating the dynamic of forgiveness, it is important to recognize its history and context. Vitz (1997) states that “probably the single most important clinical phenomenon that Christian therapists have employed is forgiveness” (p.38). He feels that it has largely been ignored by secular therapists and that Christians have sought to integrate it into the therapeutic arena. It is therefore highly important for Christian therapists to recall the context of forgiveness. In attempting to make forgiveness available in the professional area of

practice it would be easy “to separate forgiveness from its religious roots” (McMinn et. al., 1997, p.190). Such an approach would remove the fuller picture of the dynamic, and eliminate certain historical perspectives, such as the Fall and the nature of person. Because we “have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23, NIV) we are in need of pardon.

Forgiveness is first modeled in the person of God forgiving us, but is further appreciated in understanding the nature of ourselves. “Forgiveness begins as one is able to recognize and understand the human propensity toward evil” (McMinn et. al., 1997, p.190). Such a perspective provides both client and therapist a fuller perspective of the attributes and dynamics of forgiveness. “A Christian understanding of forgiveness begins with the recognition of the depravity inherent in humanity” (Meeks & McMinn, 1997, p. 52). While an appropriate theological perspective regarding the nature of persons is useful in appreciating the context of forgiveness, it is especially important to remember that forgiveness has long been a teaching of the Church. Christians may chose to forgive for various reasons, but it needs to be recognized that an individual’s commitment to their faith often provides the greatest motivation to forgive. Christian commitment is viewed as extending forgiveness because it has been extended to you. We forgive as God has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13, NIV).

The Place of Suffering

Another aspect to consider in treating Christian clients is the way in which they have been taught to find meaning in suffering. Gassin and Enright (1995) point out that people of faith may often ascribe a certain meaning to the pain they have experienced in an offense. It may be viewed as “an opportunity to gain wisdom and knowledge, a vehicle of blessing, or as a means of spiritual development” (Gassin & Enright, 1995, p. 43). Others may view it as the opportunity to be identified with the suffering of Christ. The author also reports that as well as

being viewed as educative, some individuals interpret their situation as being “redemptive” and “transforming” in which it may “lead to positive change in other’s value system and behavior, including those of the offender” (Gassin & Enright, 1995, p. 43). These unique motivations and conceptualizations of suffering need to be strongly considered in the therapeutic process of forgiveness.

Meeks and McMinn (1997) states that four strategies are recommended in the utilizing of forgiveness appropriately in the therapeutic process. “Christian clinicians need to learn about the history of forgiveness, including its use in the pastoral care tradition” (p. 58). It is important to understand the theological and historical context of forgiveness. Secondly, it is significant to develop the therapeutic relationship so that it fosters the understanding of one’s issues, and the appropriate attitude needed to develop genuine forgiveness. Thirdly, this approach “should be considered in the context of self-awareness, empathy, humility and insight, and not as a way for a client to experience emotional relief” (p.59). Finally, the authors caution therapists to recognize the danger of utilizing forgiveness without a clear perspective regarding the nature of the offense.

Examples of Clinical Integration

In order to enhance our understanding of the application of forgiveness to the clinical, we will briefly discuss two interventions that utilize forgiveness as part of the therapeutic dynamic. DiBlasio (2010) employs a forgiveness session as part of marital counseling. It tends to be rather long (three hours) and involves thirteen steps. The steps are organized “into three sections: defining and preparing, seeking and granting forgiveness and the session concludes with designing a ceremonial act.” (p. 292). This approach attempts to discuss and explore the offense in a structured, thoughtful way. For example, while step four focuses on a “statement of the

offense” (p .294), steps eight and nine provide an opportunity for the offender to express empathy and remorse, and the development of a plan to stop the behavior. The session ends with a ceremonial act developed by the couple designed to assist them in moving “from one stage to the next.” (p. 298)

Hook and Hook (2010) have developed “The Healing Cycle” as a Christian model “to promote healing and growth from emotional problems in group therapy.” (p. 308). An essential component of this cycle is confession. “Confession is the process of verbally acknowledging one’s ownership of their problem.” (p. 315). Confession within this group context provides actual experience of forgiveness. “Confession to other people is helpful because it makes guilt and forgiveness concrete.” (p. 315) .The validation of others can be a powerful mechanism through which God’s forgiveness can be made real.

Summary

The therapeutic use of forgiveness has been seen as a powerful dynamic in the healing of individuals. It has a long history extending back to the Garden of Eden. Its importance has been stressed in the Scriptures and taught in the church for many centuries. While it has been only recently that Christian therapists have attempted to apply it to the arena of their practice, it must be noted that its utilization and operation has occurred in the Church long before the institution of psychology and social work. Therefore, it is highly important that we as people of faith in clinical practice remember our historical and spiritual foundation in its appropriately integrating forgiveness into therapy. Long before these professions attempted to tap the powerful dynamic of forgiveness, God had planned and modeled it in the person and work of His Son. In order to develop a therapeutic “tree” from which others may benefit from its fruit, it is essential that we not just recall, but maintain the roots from which the “tree” has come.

References

- Atkinson, D. J., Field, D. F., Holmes, A. & O'Donovan, O. (1995) (Ed.), *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press.
- Augustine. Handbook on Faith, Hope and Love. [On-line] Available:
<http://www.ccel.org/a/augustine/enchitidin/enchitidin-bod.html>.
- Burns, J. P. (1989). *Theological Anthropology*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Calvin, J. On the Christian Life. In Henry Beveridge,(1845).,(Trans & Ed.), [On-line]
http://www.ccel.wheaton.edu/calvin/christian_life/christian_life.html., 5.
- Cunningham, B. B., (1985). The will to forgive: A pastoral theological view of forgiving.
The Journal of Pastoral Care, 39(2).
- DiBlasio, F. A. (2010). Christ-like forgiveness in marital counseling: A clinical follow-up of two empirical studies. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*. 29(4).
- DiBlasio, F. A. (1993). The roles of social worker's religious beliefs in helping family members forgive. *Family in Society*, 74(3).
- Finkel, E. J., Rusbolt, C. E., Kumashiro, M. & Hannon, K. (2002). Dealing with betrayal in close relationships: Does commitment promote forgiveness? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82(6).
- Gassin, E. A. & Enright, R. D., (1995). The will to memory in the process of forgiveness.
Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 14(1).
- Hook, J. P. & Hook, J. N., (2010). The healing cycle: A Christian model for group therapy.
Journal of Psychology and Christianity. 29(4).
- Luther, M., A Treatise on Good Works. In A. Spaeth, L. D. Reed & H. E. Jacobs, (1915).
(Trans. & Eds). Philadelphia: A.J. Wolman, Vol. 1 [On-line] Available:

<http://www.ccel.org/pub/resources/text...tenburg/luther/catechism/web/cat-07.html>.

Luther, M., *The Large Catechism*. In Benta, F. & Daw, W. H. T. (1921) (Trans). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, [On-line] Available:

<http://www.ccel.org/pub/resources/text...tenburg/luther/catechism/web/cat-07.html>.

Macaskill, A. (2005). Defining forgiveness: Christian clergy and the general population perspective. *Journal of Personality*, 73(5).

Macaskill, A., Maltby, J., & Day, L. (2002). Forgiveness of others and emotional empathy. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 42(5).

Malcolm, W. & Greenberg, L. (2002). Forgiveness as a Process of Change in Individual Therapy in McCullough, M.E., Pargament, K.E. & Thoresen, C.E. (Eds.). *Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Guilford.

Maio, G.R., Thomas, G., Fincham, F. D., & Carnelley, K. B. (2008). Unraveling the role of forgiveness in family relationships, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 94(2).

McMinn, M. R. (1996). *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale.

McMinn, M. R., Meeks, K. R., Dominguez, A.W., Ryan, J. G., & Novotay, K. (1999). Forgiveness motives among evangelical Christians: Implication for Christian marriage and family therapists. *Marriage and Family: A Christian Journal*, 2(2).

Meeks, K. R. & McMinn, M. R. (1997). Forgiveness: More trauma therapeutic technique. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, Vol. 16:1

Taylor, V. (1956). *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: A Study in New Testament Theology*.

New York: MacMillan,

The Holy Bible, New International Version. New York: Oxford Press, 1984.

Thomas, G. (2000). The Forgiveness. *Christianity Today*, January

Vitz, P. (1997). A Christian View of Personality. In R. C. Roberts and M .R. Talbot, (Eds.)

Limning the Psyche. Grand Rapids: Baker.

Walton, E. (2005). Therapeutic forgiveness: Developing a model for empowering victims of sexual abuse. *Clinical Social Work Journal*. 33(2).