



FORGIVENESS

Unleashing a Transformational Process

A Study of Christian
Forgiveness, Confession,
Repentance, and Reconciliation

Larry D. Ellis

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Confession, Repentance, and Reconciliation**

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Foreword

Human beings have developed many paradigms for achieving what they consider to be resolutions to their problems of pain, unkindness, and outright injury inflicted on them by others. These models or patterns unfortunately masquerade in people as styles of forgiveness. As a result of these pseudo-patterns for avoiding or bypassing authentic forgiveness, true reconciliation among humans often remains in a cloud of a wistful dreamland which fails to relate meaningfully to the realm of reality and so continues to be out of reach for most people. Accordingly, the world is perpetually plagued with loneliness, distrust, hostility, and violence which constantly build into explosive experiences that become justifications for various human responses of holding grudges and/or outright actions of revenge and 'get evenness'.

There is, however, an alternative way for handling our shattered feelings of betrayal, disloyalty and injury which was repeatedly disclosed in God's dealings with unfaithful Israel. Moreover, this way was most clearly revealed in Jesus, the Christ, who came into the world to provide true forgiveness for humanity's alienation and rebellion against God. In his self-giving life and sacrificial death Jesus also modeled for mortals the authentic pattern of forgiveness which can lead to genuine reconciliation. But whereas forgiveness requires only the volition of the party who has been injured, reconciliation demands the involvement of both parties in a relationship.

These topics and others have been carefully discussed in this present work by my former student, Larry Ellis, who can take

his place among current writers as an authentic representative of forthright, honest evaluators who seek to challenge easy answers for difficult human concerns. He has reflected on a number of myths concerning what forgiveness is and has sought to detail why concepts of confession are often misfocused and fail to encompass the concept of agreement with God as suggested in the Bible. He has also correctly noted that repentance goes far beyond a mere change in the intellect but involves a turning around of one's entire life. In addition, he has highlighted the fact that reconciliation, which encompasses much more than getting along with those who once were not tolerated, may effectively be achieved by humans. But these issues involve the transformation of one's heart and will. You should discover in this very readable study book for the church involving forgiveness that Ellis's thinking and writing are both perceptive and stimulating. His illustrations are, moreover, captivating and clearly represent recognizable human relationships ranging from stories in the biblical period to the Apollo 11 astronauts and contemporary tragedies. The ease with which he shares his own humanness and those of others is also refreshing.

His allusions to personal and other illustrative life struggles on the pages of this book should provide an open invitation to readers to consider their own struggles with forgiveness and reconciliation. His obvious intention, therefore, is to challenge 'innovative' and pseudo-forms of forgiveness, confession, repentance, and reconciliation with the hope of encouraging others in their quest for a transforming integrity of life.

Such a desire undoubtedly harmonizes with the goal of God in the incarnation of Jesus who provided the model of genuine forgiveness which was epitomized in Jesus' declaration of forgiveness on the cross (cf. Luke 23:34) and reenacted in the death of Stephen not long thereafter (cf. Acts 7:60). Such a pattern undoubtedly had a further impact upon the fiery Paul who was the official judging agent in Stephen's execution (Acts 8:1) and who ultimately followed in the footsteps of his victim. Genuine forgiveness is not something

that will go unnoticed in the world and in God's timing can have a mushrooming effect upon communities of faith and ultimately upon those around them.

As a supporter of the goals of Larry Ellis in this work, I welcome you to an intriguing journey on the pathway of forgiveness, confession, repentance and ultimately of reconciliation with God and others.

Gerald L. Borchert, Ph.D.

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August 22, 2009

Chapter 1

The Destructive Consequence of Innovative Forgiveness¹

The Invitation

As we start this journey together, I hope that the story of the shift in my understanding of forgiveness will help you begin to rewrite your story. My early years of Christian formation were in good Southern Baptist churches, some small and some quite large. I faithfully participated in all the activities offered in each, especially those activities that involved worship and music. After college, I saw myself as a bit more musically sophisticated and lived a number of years in the Presbyterian world, then moved to a North American Baptist church. Finally, I graduated to the ‘ultimate’ of sophistication in liturgical worship and classical music, the Episcopal Church. Along the way, I had served on the staffs of many of these churches in the pastoral areas of worship and music. I had a diverse portfolio of worship leadership experience and had read many books about worship. I felt I knew quite a bit about worship. But my worship education was, to that point, essentially self-directed. I decided that to have a more effective worship ministry, I needed a formal education. My undergraduate electrical engineering degree had been earned more than thirty years previously. I made a bold decision to attend

1. Innovative forgiveness is a term for new and divergent understandings about forgiveness that are not consistent with the historical and biblical teachings on the subject, but which are widespread within much of our Western culture today including many Christian churches.

graduate school studying worship, theology, and Christian history. After examining the academic programs at several seminaries and universities, I selected The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies² and for the next several years, I commuted between Colorado to Florida to complete my classes.

I will never forget the first day at my new school. My anxiety was high. But in those first few hours on campus, during a brief worship experience at the opening presidential address, God forever changed my life.

I had come to school carrying a great deal of heaviness in my heart. I had a strong sense of betrayal by several people, who I felt were close friends. Of course, no one would have known this. I was very good at masking these feelings. I knew no one there except the president of the school, Dr. Webber. I also knew a great deal about Handel, Bach, organ literature, choral directing, thousands of Bible verses (as well as precisely what they meant for you and me!) and a great deal about group dynamics. I was especially good at exhibiting humility, which others might see and admire. When I arrived at the campus, I entered the stately, majestic, beautiful worship space of the Grace Episcopal Church in Orange Park, FL, where the presidential address would be presented to the faculty and student body. I chose to take a seat on the very front row. I wanted to experience fully everything that went on, so where better to sit than at the very front? I looked over the large space, the high altar, the beautiful stained glass, the ornate, elevated pulpit into which the preacher would ascend, and I admired the geometry and spatial design of all the liturgical areas. The beautiful carpenter (wooden) gothic architecture, the towering cathedral ceiling, the rich wood grain, the deep red and bold blue colors of the stained glass windows depicting biblical imagery, the baptismal fount midway back in the worship space all ushered me into God's presence. This environment felt a bit

2. The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies is located in Orange Park, Florida. See www.iwsfla.org.

mystical, and the moment filled me with a little anxiety as well as great anticipation about what might happen there.

I heard the clamor of friendly voices, although none of them were directed toward me, as I sat alone. I was okay, because the president knew me personally and I was sitting about ten feet from where he would be speaking. In a few minutes the school Provost sat down at the piano and began to play a familiar hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” A lover of formal, liturgical worship, I was in familiar territory. People began to quiet down and they started singing. I dutifully opened the pew hymnal and I began to sing the first verse, committed to be a fully engaged participant. The room filled with several hundred strong musical voices. I could hear all four musical parts. The music was simply incredible as we all sang robustly in the reverberant, acoustically live space. Yet, I was unprepared for what was about to happen. Something totally unfamiliar swept over me. I felt like a dam broke within me, and I began to weep profusely. I could not stop. *This is not what Episcopalians do*, I thought. We did things decently and in order, perhaps even better than the Presbyterians when it comes to worship. Yet, God was in that place and his Holy Spirit was moving upon me in some mysterious way, unlike I had ever known before. Somehow, I was now clearly worshiping, but I was no longer relying primarily upon my mind and thought processes. We finished the first stanza of the hymn and then the second verse brought me into another new experience. I literally dropped to my knees on the kneeling rail. I could no longer read the words in the hymnal because of my flowing tears. I could not control my pitch. I could hear the hymn being sung, but I could not join in. I was encountering God in a way that was totally alien to me. He had transcended my mind and was affecting my physical body, trying to get my attention about something at a much different level than that on which I normally functioned. God was unveiling all of my well-masked feelings of woundedness. I had no clue as to why this was happening or what would follow. Although I did not know it at

the time, God was beginning the process of showing me a new way to live.

Having ceased my attempts to keep singing, I tried to pray. My traditional evangelical way of praying did not work. All I could say was, “Lord, I am here. Do whatever needs to be done. I want to move ahead.” While the singing continued, I prayed that over and over. At that moment I made a covenant with God that I would leave no marrow on the bone, no stone unturned. I would give everything to learn all that I could from my professors, my reading, my research, my writing, and from my fellow students at my new school. I began to have a new passion to know God, unlike I had ever known before. For a long time, I had carried inside me a sense of responsibility for repairing a number of greatly stressed relationships. I wanted these relationships to be healed, but I was out of ideas about how to move ahead. I did not know *how* to forgive those who had hurt me. I had not yet experienced God taking away the masked grief and pain from my fractured heart. I was not really able to experience God’s forgiveness of me. Ironically, I was working hard to please God, but was clinging to a great deal of judgment against others, who I felt were not working as hard as I was to please God. I simply saw myself as a cut above most, a legend in my own mind, as the saying goes. I had come to graduate school to learn how to do more for God. But God had brought me there to get to know him much better. In that moment of initial epiphany, I began to experience the ability to forgive others, because I knew I had been forgiven by the grace of God. I no longer had to seek it through my faithful, dutiful, proper behavior.

The contrast between these two perspectives is stark, and as time passes I see them more and more in conflict with each other. That experience of worship was the beginning chapter of a new life that continues to grow and strengthen inside me. The process of learning to accept, rather than trying to earn, forgiveness and then forgiving others continues to this day, but it is easier now than it was at the onset of my discovery process.

Chapter 2

The Process of Forgiveness

The Meaning of Forgiveness

The Christian theologian Dr. Catherine Dooley explains in her powerful essay on forgiveness that our foundational calling to intimacy with God and others can be restored through heart-felt forgiveness.

Forgiveness is an intentional process in which the forgiver freely chooses not to return injury for injury but rather to respond in a loving way to the person or situation that has inflicted some harm. The process of forgiveness is not only between an individual and God or between individuals, but includes the forgiveness of self, pardon between groups and the forgiveness of social and political structures. The capacity for forgiveness generally arises out of the experience of being forgiven and leads to reconciliation or mutual acceptance. Forgiveness is a difficult process because it is unconditional.¹

Forgiveness is one of the most controversial and misunderstood subjects in the area of religion. Dooley's explanation of forgiveness goes to the core of the Christian understanding about forgiveness. She defines forgiveness as freely choosing not to seek

1. Catherine Dooley, "Theology of Forgiveness" in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 473.

retribution, but instead to respond in a benevolent way to the person that has inflicted harm.

We need to be very clear when forgiveness is important and when it is not. Forgiveness is for people who have received great pain and suffering to extend to the persons that have caused them pain and suffering. Lewis Smedes states,

Like good wine, forgiving must be preserved for the right occasion. The hurt that creates a crisis of forgiving has three dimensions. It is always *personal*, *unfair*, and *deep*. When you feel this kind of three-dimensional pain, you have a wound that can be healed only by forgiving the one who wounded you.²

We cannot forgive someone who has not hurt us.³ Only the one who has been hurt can offer forgiveness. When our sense of hurt and pain is self-inflicted, we must extend forgiveness to ourselves. Certainly, not everything that offends us can be forgiven. Smedes' perspective on what may be forgiven is a bit narrower than what Dooley presents. Smedes argues that the concept of forgiveness is not relevant to political systems, corporate cultures, economic hardships, and unfortunate circumstances. Our anger against these things might be a great motivator for us to realign our commitments or affect positive change in those systems where we have the power to do so, but this behavior is far more about justice than forgiveness. I agree, and furthermore see no example in Jesus' teaching that references these structures as entities that should be forgiven. While Jesus does call us to rectify abuses and problems in these arenas, that teaching does not draw them within the scope of our forgiveness process, except for our forgiveness toward those individuals who directly mismanage these operations.

2. Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurt We Don't Deserve* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1984), 5.

3. *Ibid.*, 5-7.

In her book *Unconditional Love and Forgiveness*, Edith R. Stauffer presents a helpful, practical explanation of what forgiveness is. She writes,

Forgiveness can take place only within ourselves, since we are the ones whose expectations, demands, or conditions are not being met. To forgive means to cancel. What needs to be cancelled? The mental or emotional demands which we have decided must be honored in order for us to give love. Canceling is not a pardon that wipes out or restores the wrong of another. An act cannot be changed—it is a past event, a record of what happened. Canceling is neither forgetting nor the inability to remember a wrong committed. This would be impractical, as we need to remember the situation in order to protect ourselves in the future. However, we do not remember the act to use it against another; we remember it only to learn from it.⁴

The act of forgiveness requires initiation by the one who has been offended. When we have been hurt, we are the ones to forgive. This process of forgiveness is true between God and individuals as well as individuals with each other. Both Dooley and Stauffer are clear that when we are hurt, we are to offer forgiveness. As we will see later, reconciliation requires an active participation by the offending party, taking responsibility for what he or she has wrongly done, but forgiveness absolutely does not. From our examination of many Scriptures, we will see that Jesus does not require nor even suggest that the offending party plays any part in our forgiving process. The guiding principle here seems to be that when we are offended, we, who are the ones offended, are to extend forgiveness unconditionally to those who hurt us. An important perspective here is not just that Jesus commands us to do so, but that it is wise to do so, because offering forgiveness is what God has always done for all of humanity. The

4. Edith R. Stauffer, *Unconditional Love and Forgiveness* (Diamond Springs, CA: Triangle Publishers, 1987), 204.

capacity to extend forgiveness in this manner is an empowerment by the Spirit of God. In this sense, it is a supernatural act.

While God offers forgiveness to all, that gift of grace does not automatically restore our relationships with him without any response on our part. Rather, God's gift of forgiveness simply provides the opportunity for healing to begin. The same will be true in our human relationships—not all our relationships will be restored, even with the genuine extension of forgiveness or confession of our own inappropriate actions. Conflict resolution requires the active participation of both parties.

In his essay “Forgiveness,” C. S. Lewis writes that often, instead of asking for forgiveness, he is really hoping God will excuse him. “Forgiveness says, ‘Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology; I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before.’ But excusing says, ‘I see that you couldn’t help it or didn’t mean it; you weren’t really to blame.’”⁵ If we are not to blame, then there is nothing to forgive. Forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites. Many of our actions carry some element of both. If we have a perfect excuse, we don’t need forgiveness. If all of our action needs forgiveness, then there was no excuse for it. What we often call ‘asking God’s forgiveness’ is really asking God to accept our excuses. We usually have some perceived extenuating circumstances that we must point out to God or to those we hurt. We ignore the really important thing—the part left over after the excuses are explained, but which the excuses do not cover, the portion which is inexcusable, but not, thank God, unforgivable. If we disregard this leftover part, we go away imagining that we have repented and been forgiven when all that has happened is that we have satisfied ourselves with our own excusing. They might well be very bad excuses, but we are usually too easily satisfied with ourselves.

Lewis offers two remedies for this danger. One is to acknowledge that God knows all the great excuses, even better than we do. If

5. C. S. Lewis, “Forgiveness” from *The Weight of Glory* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2000), 178-179.

Praise for FORGIVENESS

*I wish every believer could have the opportunity to read the wonderful new book by Larry Ellis called *Forgiveness: Unleashing a Transformational Process*. We have all been hurt and wounded and need to have a basic understanding of the power of forgiveness. As one who daily helps pick up the pieces of wounded lives I can attest from first-hand experience how the enemy uses resentment and unforgiveness to ruin countless lives. There is no doubt in my mind that many lives will be transformed by the Godly wisdom contained in this book. I strongly recommend this volume as a vital resource in your ministry arsenal.*

Dennis Jernigan

Worship Artist/Song Receiver/Board Member—Exodus International
<http://www.dennisjernigan.com/>

Forgiveness: Unleashing a Transformational Process is an insightful and inspiring book. Larry is able to draw deeply from his personal experience as well as a variety of scholarly sources to provide some soulful challenges to the reflective and self-aware reader. I find myself compelled to pass along the message of hope that is found on every page.

The Rev. Catherine Tran
Spiritual Director, Evergreen, Colorado

There is much here that is worthy of private thought and/or group discussion; but regardless of the attendant circumstances, Ellis's treatment of the thirteen "fictional myths about forgiveness" should be required reading for every Christian now.

Phyllis Tickle

Author, *The Great Emergence*,
<http://www.thegreatemergence.com/>



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