Seventy Times Seven: Abuse and the Frustratingly Extravagant Call To Forgive

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Abstract: Jesus called his disciples to forgive without limit. But in situations of abuse an emphasis on immediate forgiveness of abusers, on enemy love, and on reconciliation ignores the fact that forgiveness is an unfolding psychological and spiritual process, that it includes a significant decision not to retaliate, and that it is a generous moral act that may be separated from feelings of forgiveness and from interpersonal reconciliation. In walking with both the injured and those who injure, the church has a role in fostering restorative justice. This includes the offer of healing relationships and resources to those who have been abused and the initiation of relationships that call offenders to account with a view toward their repentance and restoration. Within the framework of restorative justice, the offering and receiving of divine and human forgiveness has deeper integrity.

> If God were not forgiving, heaven would be empty.
> – *Zimbabwean proverb*

That's the theological bottom line: all of us fall short in the light of a just and holy God, but the God known through the long biblical story is also a forgiving God. But as true—and profoundly true—as this bottom line conviction is, it ignores the complicated, practical fine print. Exactly what does this conviction mean for those who have been abused, for abusers, and for the families, friends, and churches who are called to love both?

As contemporary theologians have been quick to point out, affirming a God who forgives does *not* mean we should offer cheap forgiveness to those who violate others. It does *not* mean we are free to blame those who have been abused for their inability to forgive the people who violated them. Rather, it means that appeal to divine justice in relation to abuse must always be tempered by the divine offer of forgiveness and call to transformation. It means that in our appeal to God's forgiveness we must remember that God's restorative justice includes the pain of taking responsibility for our wrong actions as well as the invitation to

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live differently. Affirming trust in a God who both judges and forgives also means humility of spirit: we recognize that it is not we but God who can truly judge the human soul.

Further, holding fast to both divine justice and forgiveness may call for different responses from those who violate others, from those who are violated by others, and from Christian friends who stand alongside both. This suggests that we need a more nuanced Christian theology and practice of forgiveness than we often assume.[1]

HONORING THE VOICE OF INJURED ONES

Theological convictions, if they are to shimmer in our souls, must be able to withstand the messiness of life, including the realities that color the lives of those whom the Bible refers to both literally and symbolically as "widows and orphans," "the poor," "the exiled," or "the least of these." A Christian theology of forgiveness that speaks to people who have been violated must attend to the bodily experience and particular feelings that emerge when one has been bullied, beaten, abandoned, sexually assaulted, or abused. Consider just this one story of a high school student getting ready to leave for college, a young woman who as a child had been sexually abused by a churchgoing neighbor.[2]

> *When she saw him turning the corner from the alley onto Main Street her stomach dribbled down between her knees. She moved deliberately but slowly so as not to have seemed to have noticed him. She positioned her back in his direction, stared intently at the items in the shop window, and held her breath, hoping she would disappear among those walking the street. She would have to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. She did not want to talk to him. Perhaps he didn't want to talk to her either. It was a short hope, slapped by his voice at her shoulder.*
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> *"Ann, may I talk with you a minute." She didn't want to hear his voice. She didn't want to turn and look at his bald head, wisps of gray at the side, his thin, dry lips French-kissing hers, poking, sliding. She shivered involuntarily and turned.*
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> *"Yes?" Stone-faced. "What do you want?" She was being rude. She didn't care. Disgust surrounded her like a shield.*
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> *She held the shield guardedly, remembering the man in his dark bed inviting three or four of them, neighborhood kids, inside for lemonade and*

1. This essay was substantially revised from Gayle Gerber Koontz, "As We Forgive Others: Christian Forgiveness and Feminist Pain," The *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68 (April 1994), 170-193.

2. While this is a true story, based on personal knowledge, Ann is a fictional name. It is based on the experience of a Mennonite woman from Ohio in the 1950s and 1960s.

then to the dark place to unzip his pants. "Do you want to touch it?" She had backed away from him, out into the sunshine and toward home, where on other days she had watched him approach, each time hoping Mom would be home from work soon so he could not come in alone and stand beside her, reaching into her pants, rubbing, rubbing. The times she had sat on the porch swing, shelling peas while Mother cooked supper. "I'll help shell," he smiled. "Sit closer." Rubbing, rubbing. "There, does that feel good?" And the nod. The silent, reluctant nod.

"I just wanted to say," his voice broke, interrupting her memories. She saw his pink eyes blur behind his glasses. She looked down at his rough gray shirt and back at his face.

"What?" There was no pity in her voice.

"I'm sorry for those things . . ."

She stared at him, unsmiling. The fishing picnic. He had sent the others off with worms and kept her behind on the blanket. Standing, he had rubbed himself on her and put his hard thing in her pants and after a while he had wet himself on her stomach, cleaning it up with his handkerchief, saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," but it was just dirty and she had felt sick.

"Will you forgive me?" His mouth trembled at the edges.

She did not look away, remembering the last time he had tried to kiss her by the refrigerator in the kitchen while her mother was grocery shopping. She had felt it growing for a long time, like a balloon gathering air, silently, stretching, forming itself inside her and it had surprised him, she knew, with its force. "No!" She had pushed him away from her mouth. "Stop it! I don't like it. Don't do this anymore. And don't ever bother my sister." He had left. She had told no one any of it. She had avoided him. Her last words had hung between them for years.

"Will you forgive me?" he now repeated, quavering.

"I don't know. I don't feel like it." She turned and walked away. It was the last time she saw him. Two years later, away at college, she noticed his obituary in the hometown paper.

It would be easy, given Christian understandings of forgiveness, to blame Ann for her attitude and action—or for her to blame herself. First of all, there is the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our debts, *as we forgive our debtors*." We repeat this pointed prayer over and over again with millions of other Christians. It is part of the ongoing prayer of our community, a formative prayer for our life together. In Matthew, the prayer Jesus gave us is followed by the warning that if we forgive others their trespasses, God will also forgive us; but if we do not forgive others, neither will God forgive our trespasses (Mt. 6:14-15).

Even more direct for someone like Ann are those verses in Luke:

> Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent," you must forgive. (Lk. 17:3-4)

These words give all Christians pause. They are especially sobering when we feel outrage at violent acts and repeated abuses. The more we see and feel righteous anger, the more we have to forgive. And the more personally we experience injury—experiences of physical violence, significant losses, or manipulative emotional abuse at the hands of others—the harder it is to forgive those who inflict it. How can we forgive those who blatantly disregard what we know to be critical "no trespassing" zones? Maybe Ann *should* forgive her neighbor, but what if she doesn't *feel* like it? Her abuser does, after all, appear to be sorry; and his repentance seems to be genuine since the behaviors had stopped years before. In any case, would it make any difference if he were not really repentant but was acting out of fear for what she might do or say to others? Should she not forgive him anyway?

It is true that Christian faith offers and calls us to extravagant forgiveness both as a sign of the coming reign of God[3] and with the hope of reconciling broken relationships among God and humans. According to the witness of Scripture and the church, God offers to us human sinners not measure for measure but divine forgiveness undeserved. Even when we have not yet changed our ways, God's spirit calls us—as Jesus called Zacchaeus—to draw near.[4] God holds us hopefully, inviting change. When someone is repentant and asks our forgiveness, we should not deny it.

And yet we can understand Ann's difficulty. For most of us, too, have in some degree stood in Ann's shoes—injured, angry, feeling relatively powerless as we relive hurt or trauma. Significant injuries limit our ability to trust others, engender false shame, isolate us, and often leave us bitter and resentful. We may seek punishment in order to hurt the one who hurt us or restitution even when there is no restitution to be had. We may be bound to the past, to fear, guilt, or low self-esteem in ways that infect our spirit, separating us from joyful life with God and others.

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3. N. T. Wright outlines his understanding of Jesus' symbols of the kingdom, including forgiveness, which serves as a remarkable sign that God was indeed returning Israel from exile and reinstating the Hebrew people as a "light to the nations." This and other signs "replaced the praxis of Torah as defining characteristics of the restored Israel." *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 1999), 69-70.

4. Mary Schertz, a professor of New Testament at A.M.B.S., offered this perspective on the Zacchaeus story in a sermon at Assembly Mennonite Church in Goshen, Ind., in 1993.

In addition, Christians who repeat the centrality of forgiveness, suffering love, proclaim a gospel of reconciliation, and emphasize commitment to an ethic of peace and love of enemy can add injury to injury. Presented with the duty to forgive and be reconciled when they do not feel like it, Ann, and those she represents, feel shame for being inadequate, unforgiving Christians. These cherished theological convictions become another form of blaming the victim.

Does this mean that for the sake of the injured ones the church should back away from emphasizing forgiveness and reconciliation? I do not think so. Not only are forgiveness and reconciliation essential to a biblically grounded, theologically sound Christian faith, our world desperately needs communities of faith committed to reconciling work. Political, economic, racial, ethnic, and sexual boundaries not only define our identities but also set us in conflict and sometimes lead us to war with each other. A Christian and Mennonite heritage has shown us errors in our understanding and practice of forgiveness and reconciling love; but it has also shown us the amazing power of God's healing work through them. For the sake of the world that God loves we have reason to cling to these profound aspects of faith that have been tested over time.

God's saving purposes include the creation of a global, reconciling community of men and women in Christ. To support this purpose we need a rich understanding and practice of restorative justice. Christian pacifists have often been criticized for being passive and ignoring the need for interpersonal and structural justice while focusing on love of enemy. Among Mennonites this critique has engendered a more holistic theology and practice of peacemaking and restorative justice.[5] However, it is also a temptation for contemporary Mennonites standing in a tradition known for its strong commitment to pacifism and suffering love to speak more about justice than forgiveness, as a corrective for what appears to be lack of care for victims. Focus on *restorative* justice for *both* the injured and offenders is one way to emphasize that both love *and* justice, repentance *and* forgiveness, are critical aspects of a reconciling process.

While confessing pain and confronting those who injure are positive steps toward restorative justice, adequate restitution for unjust acts or

5. For a description of restorative justice and its theological basis see the pioneering work of Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1990); and the biblical interpretation of Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), as well as his more recent *Compassionate Justice: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue with Two Gospel Parables on Law, Crime, and Restorative Justice* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2012).

interpersonal wounds often cannot be made. Therefore the existence of a Spirit-filled reconciling community depends finally on the gifts of divine and human forgiveness. Injuries beget injuries, feed anger, and pluck the fruits of the spirit from the community of faith unless members, who are themselves rooted in God's just and forgiving love, intervene to break cycles of hurt with straight talk, and calls to repent, forgive, and receive new spirits. For this reason, and because many cultures in which the church resides encourage revenge as a proper response to injury, we must continue to foster a strong, nuanced theological and spiritual orientation toward forgiveness.

At the same time we need to take seriously some of the problems that injured ones have identified with the cluster of convictions related to forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation. Some changes can and ought to be made.

Forgiveness in Light of Injured Ones

The theology and practice of forgiveness we formulate, teach, and preach needs to respect the experience of those who have been scarred by violent and abusive behavior. A church that seeks to witness to God's transforming love and power cannot afford to mouth platitudes to the injured. Further, if the church's practice does not include confronting abusers, the offenders often go on to harm others, not only perpetuating injury but also mistrust of the church that deafens injured ones to its teaching about forgiveness.

It is important also to remember that abusers injure not only the direct recipients of the actions. Often those close to the recipients are injured as well.[6] When a suicide bomber kills himself and those around him, many people besides those killed or physically wounded also suffer injury and loss. In relation to sexual abuse by church leaders, the families of the abused and abuser are often shamed and sometimes isolated, and the congregations and institutions with which the leader is associated may bear the shame and stain of the abuse and the related mistrust of the watching world.[7] Our identification of those who are "abused" should

6. Christopher Marshall makes a distinction between *primary victims* and *secondary victims.* He suggests that when injustice or bitterness created by an offense is still felt by later generations there are also "*subsequent victims* of the offender, who may also need to find a place of release from their pain through forgiving the absent offender . . ."—*Beyond Retribution*, 265.

7. Karen A. McClintock in *Sexual Shame: An Urgent Call to Healing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) notes how the shame of a leader "infects the whole body of Christ with a heavy sense of moral failure, whose powerlessness can become chronic." In order to heal this, "clergy and congregations will need to address sexual issues openly," which requires prior steps of education and conversational skill among both leaders and congregational participants. See chapters 2 and 8.

take this into account. The actions of those who injure individuals or groups harm people in widening circles.

Sometimes even offenders are victims. They may themselves have suffered physical or sexual abuse as children. Less dramatically, in a process of church discipline abusers may have been treated unfairly or believe they were treated so. Church members may refuse to trust a discipline process carried out by leaders and therefore foster rumors and resentment that unjustly harms a repentant offender. Although the focus for offenders must be on their own repentance, insofar as they harbor bitterness and desire to retaliate, they also are called to forgive those who they believe have wronged them.

A theology of forgiveness and reconciliation that has integrity in relation to people injured by physical or emotional violence and abuse would have at least the following dimensions.

1. *It would articulate a vision of a community in which justice and love embrace.*

It would reflect a holistic biblical understanding of God's saving work in the world, marked by both justice and forgiveness. God's desire for just and loving relationships among humans—rather than an apparent harmony that hides injustice—suggests several important actions when injury has occurred: the silence that isolates injured ones must be broken; abusers must be confronted with the wrongness and results of their actions and steps taken to hold them accountable for ongoing actions; and resources for healing must be directed to the needs of those who have been injured. Forgiveness is not the first or only word when Christians face injury.

In addition, remembering God's passion for restorative justice includes supporting just power dynamics between the injurers and injured. Injured ones are likely to feel extremely powerless and are often in fact quite powerless economically, socially, or physically in relation to those who injure them. Ann, who was injured as a relatively powerless child, was not ready to forgive, perhaps in part because she continued to feel powerless, disadvantaged, and shamed in relation to the abuser and their social contact. She was isolated in her embarrassment: "She had told no one any of it."

Some cultural roles and ideals for women also contribute to low self-esteem and a sense of powerlessness in relation to abusers. For example, consider formation that discourages girls and women from expressing initiative and anger, presses them to be "nice" all the time, expects them to yield to the needs or desires of others, and assumes they should be ready always to understand and forgive. British playwright and novelist Fay Weldon writes in *Female Friends:*

> Understand, and forgive, my mother said, and the effort has quite exhausted me. I could do with some anger to energize me, and bring me back to life again. But where can I find that anger? Who is to help me? My friends? I have been understanding and forgiving my friends, my female friends, for as long as I can remember. . . . Understand husbands, wives, fathers, mothers. . . . understand fur-coated women and children without shoes. Understand school—Jonah, Job, and the nature of Deity; understand Hitler and the Bank of England and the behavior of Cinderella's sisters. Preach acceptance to wives and tolerance to husbands; patience to parents and compromise to the young. . . . Grit your teeth, endure. Understand, forgive, accept . . . O Mother, what you taught me! And what a miserable, crawling, sniveling way to go, the worn-out slippers neatly placed beneath the bed, careful not to give offense.[8]

When a person has been encouraged to develop the habit of indiscriminate forgiveness, eagerness to forgive may express lack of respect for oneself and one's own worth. Women struggle to determine when it is appropriate to understand and forgive and when it is appropriate to blame and be angry rather than to be "careful not to give offense." Such women sometimes find themselves in a psychological Catch-22 when they are faced with the need to forgive someone who injured them. If they forgive too quickly or inappropriately they may slip back into the ocean of unworthiness and lack of self-respect—the sea from which they are just emerging. If they refuse to forgive they fail not only to be "nice," but to be truly "Christian."

Christian ethicist Beverly Harrison's essay "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love"[9] has been helpful to many injured ones who have rightly felt anger and blame toward their abusers but have then felt shame for feeling angry. This shame is exacerbated when others in the church reinforce it by criticizing the injured persons for allowing the sun to "go down on your anger" (Eph. 4:26). A cycle ripe for the growth of resentment has begun. Harrison suggests that one way to break this cycle is to recognize the valid role that anger and blame play in the work of love. If injured ones can accept and value their anger as a sign of moral sensitivity rather than of moral insensitivity, and if they can recognize the cultural dynamics at work so they can identify when they feel a false sense of shame for being angry, then they will be freer to direct the energy from their anger into creative acts toward change.

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8. Quoted from Jeffrie G. Murphy, "Forgiveness and Resentment," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 7 (1982), 503.

9. Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 3-21.

A step that could help to prepare Ann for the drama of forgiveness[10] would be for others to help strengthen her sense of social and personal power. If she could find the space to share her shame, fear, and resentment with some other members of the Christian community who could hear and receive her hurt and anger, affirm her right to blame her abuser, and offer her respect and acceptance, she might gain voice, self, and a sense of empowerment that could eventually contribute to the freedom to forgive her debtor.

Additional expressions of respect for justice in relationships might include providing advocates for injured ones in confronting abusers or doing so on their behalf, and protecting the public identities of those abused if it appears that transparency would add to further social shaming.

2. *A theology relevant to those who have been abused would highlight not only the gift of God's grace in healing from sin, but also God's grace in healing from injury and shame*.

Much Christian theology and teaching has focused on God's grace as it heals our guilt and sin.[11] However, in his book *Shame and Grace,* Lewis Smedes suggests that many people need healing from false or undeserved shame.

Many who bear false shame are overly conscientious, responsible, and moral people, but they feel "inadequate, defective, unworthy, or not fully valid" as human beings."[12] Undeserved shame arises from "an image of what we ought to be that is concocted out of false ideals."[13] Sources of undeserved shame include unaccepting parents, graceless religion, false cultural ideals, and social shame—when we are rejected because we belong to a group that is despised or mistrusted.

Clinical psychologist and Methodist pastor Karen McClintock notes that when shame is related to taboo sexual experiences in the home, church, or community, the feelings of shame grow and intensify. "An extremely shame-bound person cuts empathetic ties to others to protect him or herself from re-experiencing these feelings." And feelings of shame "keep the secrets secret."[14]

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10. Lewis B. Smedes refers to the process of forgiveness as a "drama in five scenes."—*Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 136-137.

11. For example, the article on "Grace" in the *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. John MacQuarrie and James Childress (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), refers only to grace in relation to sinners.

12. Merle Fossum, quoted by Smedes, *Shame and Grace,* 3.

13. Smedes, *Shame and Grace,* 38, 53.

14. McClintock, *Sexual Shame*, 24.

Smedes concluded that while the answer to guilt is "pardoning grace," or forgiveness for wrongs we have done, the answer to shame is "accepting grace." Since the fear of rejection and abandonment stands behind the feeling of shame, the experience of being accepted for who one is with clear awareness of what one has been through—rage, pain, mistrust, and all—is the beginning of healing. The good news for those suffering from false shame is that the God we know through Christ accepts, cradles, holds, and affirms us "totally as the spiritual stew we are." Grace heals by removing our fear of rejection based on false shame.[15]

If our proclamation of the good news in Christ focuses only or primarily on God's gracious response to our sin and guilt, the message about the healing and transforming power of divine grace for those who suffer from shame they do not deserve will be hidden or undermined.

3. *A theology attentive to the effects of abuse would speak about forgiveness or letting go of the injury for the sake of the injured one.*

Christians have traditionally talked about the importance of forgiveness for the sake of the offender and to pave the way for reconciliation between the offender and the injured one. In recent years, secular as well as faith-oriented counselors and peacemakers have begun to speak of the significance of the act and process of forgiveness for the injured ones themselves.[16]

Albert Haase, a Franciscan priest based in Taiwan who has given workshops on spirituality throughout the United States, has observed that "it takes a lot of emotional and psychological energy to keep a wound open, to keep a grudge alive. The longer I allow a wound to fester, the more bitterness, anger and self-pity poison my blood and eat at my heart."[17] Resentment and mistrust affect the relationship of the injured one not only to the offender but to others as well.

In addition to the way injury affects an injured one's ability to develop trusting and healthy relationships, other challenges remain. Mennonite psychologist Carolyn Holderread Heggen has noted that for women who are physically and sexually abused, issues of faith and spirituality, self-esteem, and humiliation of the body make the process of healing even more complex and difficult. They also make healing critical for the sake of the injured one. As we become aware that our shame is undeserved,

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15. Smedes, *Shame and Grace,* 107-108.

16. Christine E. Gudorf is among those who have attempted to rethink Christian faith and ethics while taking seriously the experience of those who suffer from moral injury.—Gudorf, *Victimization: Examining Christian Complicity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 93.

17. Martha Sawyer Allen, "Forgiveness Brings Joy," *Elkhart Truth,* Nov. 27, 1993, B1, 2.

we often feel increasing resentment toward those who contributed to our sense of false shame. Resentment hinders the healing of shame.

"Forgiveness is a process which allows the victim to let go of the intense emotional pain associated with her abuse and replace it with inner resolution and peace," Heggen has written. "Forgiveness disarms the power of abuse to continue causing pain and turmoil and revictimization."[18] She believes it is possible for a victim to forgive an offender even when the offender remains unrepentant, and that doing so can help the injured one.

> By letting go, the offended refuses to let herself be held captive by the offender's unwillingness to repent. . . . Extending unrequested forgiveness empowers the survivor. It frees her to experience God's grace, healing, and joy in her life despite the lack of reconciliation with her offender.[19]

Smedes counseled those suffering from undeserved shame not to wait too long to forgive—to let go of the resentment caused by the injury—because in time "resentment becomes less what we feel than what we are." Surrendering it, then, means tearing away a segment of our self, which is more difficult and painful to do.[20]

Ronald Rolheiser, a Jesuit priest, believes, like Heggen and Smedes, that healing from abuse is not only a psychological process, but also a spiritual one. In *The Holy Longing* he turns to the Easter narrative, a powerful spiritual frame for dealing with losses of various kinds, including the loss of innocence and joy, the loss of trust, the loss of health, and the loss of being loved and honored in a relationship, all of which can be part of the experience of abuse. These losses represent a real death, like the death of Jesus on Good Friday. Don't minimize the violence and pain, he says. Mourn them. But don't cling to them; don't cling to the past as perhaps Mary of Magdala wanted to do when she met and wanted to hold on to the resurrected Christ in the garden. In order for the disciples to receive a new spirit at Pentecost—the kind of spirit needed to live with the power of the Holy Spirit but without the human body of Christ—they needed to "let go" of the Jesus that had been with them in the flesh. They needed time to adjust to living without Jesus. They needed the "letting go" of the ascension in order to receive a different, new life—a life that contained the loss of Jesus, but that also

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18. Carolyn Holderread Heggen's *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1993) articulated this in a significant way for Mennonites. While this book needs updating—to include, for example, more on sexual abuse of children—it remains a pioneering work on the subject.

19. Heggen, *Sexual Abuse*, 134.

20. Smedes, *Shame and Grace*, 139.

eventuated in new power. Only after letting go of the past and adjusting to a new present did the believers experience Pentecost.[21] Healing from abuse involves letting go of the bitterness and desire to retaliate that stem from the pain of the past in order to receive Spirit-filled gifts of renewed trust, hope, and joy.

4. *It would distinguish between the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation*.

This distinction has grown in significance with the development of the idea that forgiveness is important for the sake of the injured person. Forgiveness is a moral act of the injured one that is independent of a restored relationship between the offender and injured person. In the words of a commentator on pastoral care, "Forgiveness is not the equivalent of reconciliation . . . ; it is the means by which barriers to reconciliation (which may or may not follow) are removed."[22]

In a historic peace church that cherishes a strong theology of reconciliation, it is easy to assume that if someone who has suffered from violence or violation has come to forgive an abuser, then she should be ready to be reconciled with the person who injured her. However, as may be the case with a third party's call to forgive an abuser, a call for personal reconciliation may feel like a moral club to an injured one, pressing her to relate to an offender when she does not feel strong enough to do so.

In a Christian perspective, the ultimate hope *is* for reconciliation and communion—with God, other humans, and the earth. The healing of relationships that have been scarred by abuse is part of this. However, such reconciliation is not always possible. Sometimes an offender refuses to acknowledge responsibility for the injury. Sometimes the injured person does not know or loses contact with the injurer as may be the case in rape or situations of genocide. Sometimes an injured one is not ready to forgive until after an offender has died, as was the case for Ann. Sometimes the hurt is so deep that the injured ones choose to offer forgiveness but do not have the strength or desire to continue in personal relationship with those who abused them. However impossible reconciliation may seem or be, forgiveness of offenders remains both possible and a Christian hope.

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21. Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 141-166.

22. B. H. Childs, "Forgiveness," *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 438.

FORGIVENESS AS MORAL AND EMOTIONAL LETTING GO

What exactly does it mean to forgive someone who has injured you if it does not entail reconciliation? It is first of all a moral act rather than a feeling, though the two are related.

Consider for a moment the economic image of an owner and debtor, the image to which Jesus appealed in the Lord's Prayer. Someone who has access to wealth loans some of it to a poorer person. As so frequently happens in tenant systems, the debtor may become more and more dependent on the owner until he or she loses everything or falls deeply into a debt that can never be repaid. There is no way out, except either bankruptcy or forgiveness of the debt. The rather literal principle is simple: rather than exact justice, people who hold others in their power economically ought to forgive those who cannot pay their debts. This generous spirit reflects God's spirit in relation to us.

We can expand this principle to include not only material debts owed us but also moral debts owed us because others have trespassed against us. When another injures us, that person "owes" us at least an apology or perhaps restitution or reparations. If they consistently or deeply injure us, their moral debt to us may increase to the point where they cannot make restitution. As far as we are concerned they are "morally bankrupt." There is no way out for them but to declare bankruptcy and for their debt to be forgiven. Jesus' principle continues to apply: rather than exact justice, powerful people ought to forgive weak ones who cannot pay their debts.

But does this apply to those who have been abused? They are not the "powerful ones" in the relationship, are they? They are the ones who have been robbed of physical or emotional well-being. Even though it seems counterintuitive, the one who has been harmed in a relationship is more powerful than the abuser in one significant way: morally. In an essay translated from Swedish, Christian ethicist Carl Brakenhielm has defined forgiveness as a "remotivating act" in a situation of moral conflict.[23] A moral injury, he wrote, robs people of rights that belong to them as human beings. The injurer has used personal power to rob another, to establish a relationship in which the injurer says, in effect, "I am up here and you are down there." However, from a moral perspective, it is the *injured* one who is "up" and the offender who is "down." When Ann as a young adult met her abuser on the street, for example, she was "up" and he was "down" in this sense.

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23. Carl Reinhold Brakenhielm, *Forgiveness,* tr. Thor Hall (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1993), 15.

When others injure us morally or rob us of our right to be respected as persons, they "owe" us an apology or restitution. If someone or a group consistently or profoundly injures us—as in physical or sexual abuse or systemic racial injustice—that person's or group's moral debt to us may increase to the point that the offender(s) cannot make adequate restitution. The offender is "down" in relation to the injured one's moral rights.

Forgiveness is a remotivating choice and process that changes the *moral character* of a relationship that has been injured by moral offense. Brakenhielm explained it this way: Someone who truly desires the forgiveness of another person seeks to affirm the human rights and personal worth of the injured person. The one who grants forgiveness affirms the offender's human worth, which the injury obscured.

Forgiveness entails both moral criticism, the source of resentment, *and* the effort to affirm the recipient's worth as a human being and child of God. While the injured person lets go of the moral debt, he or she does not let go of the commitment to justice, which is the root of moral criticism. Forgiveness is not saying, "It's OK," as if there were no significant moral failure. If there were no serious wrongdoing, there would be no need for forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean letting go of justice, but holding on to God's restorative and compassionate justice. In this perspective, "forgiveness is a way of pursuing justice, not the abandonment of justice."[24]

Forgiveness requires extravagant generosity of spirit because the injured one has to let go of the moral advantage she holds over the injurer. It may be the only thing the one who has been hurt can withhold from the offender in order to retain some power and self-respect in the relationship and to communicate the depth of the injury. Sometimes church members blame those who have experienced abuse, their families, and others close to them for their inability to forgive without understanding this dynamic. Without also intervening to stop the abuse, to surround and empower the injured ones, they drive the injured ones, who are already alienated in significant ways, further from the arms of the church.

When there are adequate and sensitive resources for healing from injury, however, those who have been abused can and should nurture the disposition to forgive. A disposition to forgive arises from gratitude

24. Joseph Liechty, "Forgiveness," *Vision* (Spring 2007), 47. For a more extended discussion of the place of forgiveness in restorative justice see Joseph Liechty, "Putting Forgiveness in its Place: The Dynamics of Reconciliation," in *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions in Theology*, ed. David Tombs and Joseph Liechty (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006).

for God's forgiveness of our own injuries to God and others as well as from the joy and confidence of being accepted for who we are in contrast to the rejection we may face from others. As Brakenhielm has put it,

> I cannot at one and the same time believe in God's forgiveness [and acceptance] and be hardened against other persons whose life is under the same grace that mine is. . . . Thankfulness for God's forgiveness [and acceptance] is not really thankfulness if it does not also come to expression in humans in turn forgiving other humans.[25]

Focusing on gratitude to God for what is life-giving in ongoing daily life rather than focusing on injuries and their effects can become part of nurturing a disposition to forgive.

When there is the intention to forgive in light of God's reconciling purposes, the injured or shamed person can take various steps. Joseph Liechty, who spent many years working and teaching in Ireland on themes related to reconciliation, has suggested that the first dimension of the process of forgiveness is *letting go of the right to vengeance*. This choice may coincide with intense anger and hatred,[26] but it is a foundational step for eventually overcoming them. While refusing to retaliate is not the whole of forgiveness it is a profound step in the process.[27] Even when we feel hatred and pain, we can pray passionately for God's grace to break in and heal what is twisted and broken in us and in those who have injured us. We can pray that God will soften the hearts of offenders and that they will truly repent. We can pray that God remove our desire to retaliate. We can pray for our enemies.

Liechty described another aspect of the process of forgiveness as *offering love before it is deserved*, noting the biblical story of the Prodigal Son as an illustration. This is expressed in the actions and attitudes of the injured ones in response to injury: they make clear that love, not vengeance, is the motivation that shapes them. These, too, are choices that can be made even when feelings of love are not present.

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25. Brakenhielm, *Forgiveness*, 91. I have added the words in the brackets.

26. William Neblett has noted that "to grant forgiveness when resentment still persists is not uncommon at all. In fact, many human relationships could not withstand the strain if it were otherwise, if the various purposes which forgiveness serves could not be fulfilled unless every last ounce of resentment were finally wiped away."—"Forgiveness and Ideals," *Mind* 83 (1974), 270.

27. Liechty, "Forgiveness," 46. Most of the Old and New Testament materials seem to assume that conversion and repentance precede God's forgiveness, whether of a nation or of individuals. See Dorothy Jean Weaver, "On Imitating God and Outwitting Satan: Biblical Perspectives on Forgiveness and the Community of Faith," *MQR* 68 (April 1994), esp. 156-161. However Brakenhielm concluded that Jesus' view on the question is not clear. In the story of the prodigal son, for example, the son confesses after he is already in his father's arms.—Brakenhielm, *Forgiveness,* 60.

Part of this action, as Lewis Smedes describes it, involves revising our caricature of the person who injured us. When we taste resentment, our minds draw a caricature of the abuser as a monster and "define his whole person" in terms of how he injured or shamed us. In the process of forgiveness we change our picture of the offender back to the "weak and faulty human being he is (or was)."[28]

These actions can pave the way for the emotional dimension of healing. In time, sorrow can blend with anger, and compassion and sympathy can break through resentment. Transformed feeling on the part of injured ones can create openness on their part to possible reconciliation with those who have abused them. The practices of letting go of retaliation and offering love before it is deserved are spiritual dispositions and disciplines that undergird openness to both receiving and offering holy grace in the midst of the tragedies of our lives.

Because forgiveness is a process it is not neat and orderly, nor is it fully within our control. It may be more accurate and helpful to speak of forgiving as an ongoing process and attitude rather than a list of steps that happen and are then completed once for all. God's disposition to forgive us requires God to bear the burden of our offenses—past and present—in an ongoing way even in the midst of our transformation. So does our disposition to forgive others. Our intention to see an offender as other than a "monster" or to revise our feelings may be sincere but not strong enough to sustain the pain of injury at all times. The process of forgiveness may cycle back upon itself, requiring a disposition to be forgiving on an ongoing basis. Sometimes even the best intentions, moral choices, and "letting go" of pain do not seem to open the way to revised feelings toward those who abuse. Developmental psychologist Evelyn Whitehead and her husband, James, a pastoral theologian, remind us that "forgiveness is more than a personal achievement. It is a gift and a grace that, spent by our anger, we must await in hope."[29]

Cheap Grace and Honest Repentance

Those who have been deeply injured are wary of offering cheap grace and rightly so. The wariness comes from seeing all too clearly the

28. Smedes, *Sin and Grace*, 136-137. Miroslav Volf expands on the theme of "rightly remembering" wrongdoings; that is, in a way that heals wounded persons and their relationships with others, including their relation to the perpetrators. His own experience of being repeatedly interrogated and threatened by military personnel in communist Yugoslavia in 1983, followed by his attempts to re-frame the memories of his interrogator , serve as the basis for his reflections.—"God's Forgiveness and Ours: Memory of Interrogations, Interrogation of Memory," *Anglican Theological Review* 89, no. 2 (Spring 2007), 213-225.

29. Evelyn and James Whitehead, *A Sense of Sexuality* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 81.

possible misuses of forgiveness as a tool for power. For example, the demand for forgiveness or the exhortation to forgive can be used to gain or maintain control in a situation. Feigned repentance or false generosity of spirit while forgiving another can also become ways to gain personal advantage over the other. By forgiving too quickly, the offended one may reinforce a continuing, hurtful power relationship or a pattern of abuse that might also endanger others. An offender might even adopt an understanding of God's forgiveness that allows the abuser to go on sinning with a clear conscience.[30]

"Powerful and wily people use apologies to escape judgment for great evils," Smedes wrote:

> They betray a trust and, found out, they say they are sorry for mistakes in judgment. They commit a crime, and they call their crimes errors which they regret. They sneak around their offense on the oiled wheels of apology when their crime calls for nothing less than oceanic tears of remorse. They can get by with their apology because people are not able to tell the difference between the remorse of penitence and regret for bungling a job.[31]

Injured ones who understand the misuse of forgiveness know that "grace cannot be dishonest without being cheap."[32] To respond to this problem Liechty suggests that while the loving will to forgive may be unqualified and limitless, the acts of love may be calculated, strategic.[33] For example, the church needs to provide clear behavioral boundaries and supervisory relationships for abusers and safe spaces for children and vulnerable members of the Christian community. The church should also expect and invite repentance.

Those who injure must wait in hope for forgiveness. In genuine repentance an offender makes a serious plea: "I have done wrong. I have violated God's intention for me. I do not want to be separated from God and from you. I want you to trust me. And I promise from now on to be worthy of your trust." Repentance, or *metanoia*, means change or turning; it is more than saying one is sorry. Smedes has described repentance as giant's work: "Only a person who dares to look hard and deep into his potential for doing evil as well as good will have the courage to repent.

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30. Brakenhielm, *Forgiveness*, 5-7. Voltaire is reported to have said to the priest who assured him on his deathbed that God forgives all sin, "Of course he will forgive me—that's his job!"— Brakenhielm, *Forgiveness*, 11.

31. Lewis B. Smedes, "Forgiving People Who Do Not Care," *Reformed Journal* 33 (April 1983), 14.

32. Ibid., 17.

33. Liechty cited Miroslav Volf, E*xclusion and Embrace,* for referring to this as strategic or calculating love, "Forgiveness," 51.

And only a person who is willing to risk everything for the high stakes of honest reconciliation has the moral power."[34]

Honest repentance involves:[35]

1. seeing that the injured one's feelings about what we did are true and accepting her judgment as right;
2. feeling the pain we inflicted on the offended and grieving for it;
3. acknowledging and confessing responsibility for the injury and asking for forgiveness;
4 desiring and promising not to hurt the injured one again and taking steps to address the problems that led to injury the first time;
5. making restitution and demonstrating over time that repentance is sincere and deep.

Based on the importance of repentance and forgiveness in Scripture, the post-biblical church developed doctrine and practices related to them. By 1439 the Roman church held to a doctrine and sacrament of penance that consisted of contrition, confession, restitution, and absolution. Scholastic theology assumed that the first three were necessary to the fourth; popular belief held that they were also *sufficient* conditions for forgiveness.

Luther turned against this latter idea, arguing that works do not make us deserving of God's forgiveness—that forgiveness as well as repentance and faith are gracious gifts of God. Luther's point was that we can never demand forgiveness. We can only ask a favor.[36]

Anabaptist Mennonites saw the dangers of a broken link between God's gracious forgiveness and our moral lives—that is, of thinking that no matter what we do, God will forgive us. Although they affirmed with Luther the priority of grace, they emphasized the importance of following Christ in life. But in time this came to feel to some like one more condition for receiving God's acceptance and forgiving love.

A solution some have proposed is that while repentance is not a necessary condition for God to forgive an offender, repentance *is* necessary for a sinner to *experience* grace or forgiveness. In Brakenhielm's words, "One does not have to interpret prayer, repentance, and

34. Smedes, "Forgiving People Who Do Not Care," 14.

35. The following understanding of repentance is drawn from Heggen, *Sexual Abuse,* 123-126, and Smedes, "Forgiving People," 15-16. Smedes notes that confession is not the same as talking to an understanding psychiatrist: "We confess when we cannot stand the hurt we caused another. . . . We confess when naked in the eyes of the person we unfairly wounded we plead nothing but the hope of grace."

36. One can meet Luther's objection and adopt a weaker version that penance is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for God's grace.

restitution as demands to be fulfilled in order to obtain forgiveness; one can simply consider them as presuppositions for experiencing God's forgiveness in a meaningful way." Understood in this way, the necessity of repentance "can very well be held together with the thought that God's forgiveness is unconditional and absolute."[37]

In the context of human relationships this understanding can help mediate the problem of cheap grace. When an injured one offers forgiveness to an unrepentant offender, the offender cannot truly experience it. He cannot receive the grace offered him without honest repentance.

In fact, an unrepentant offender does not want forgiveness. Speaking in the aftermath of World War II, Christian poet, novelist, and historian Charles Williams recognized that "the deeper the injury, the less inclined the evildoer is to ask, even to desire, that the sin may be forgiven—perhaps the less able." We cannot make another repent. If an offender refuses to repent, he will experience a community's acts of restorative justice—which includes requiring him to bear responsibility for wrongdoing—as punishment rather than as one face of grace. If the offender refuses forgiveness, "it is difficult to see what else can be done except to leave him alone."[38]

Honest repentance is clearly required for reconciliation, for in order for a relationship to be restored in some right form, both parties or groups must be willing to "experience the fellowship of sufferings."[39] That includes remembering and confessing pain, forgiving and repenting—all difficult actions. Liechty names *absolution* as the final step in forgiveness: "the wronged party indicates an intention not to bear grudges."[40] The parallel final step in repentance might be appropriate acts of restitution or sharing resources that indicates the injured one's intrinsic value and the penitent's intention to empower the injured one for a better future. With honest completion of these final dimensions, a renewed relationship between injurer and injured becomes possible. It may be stronger than before the offense or it may be more distant, but the relationship will testify to the possibility that compassionate justice can prevail over violence and violation in abusive relationships.[41]

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37. Brakenhielm, *Forgiveness*, 79.

38. Charles Williams, *The Forgiveness of Sins* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, [1942] 1984), 165, 199.

39. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 277.

40. Liechty, "Forgiveness," 52.

41. Marshall uses the term "compassionate justice" in the title of his second book on restorative justice.

Walking in the Light of the Resurrection: Accompanying Abusers and the Abused

Christian congregations and friends of Christ are called to live in hope in light of God's coming new creation as announced and embodied in the messiah Jesus and made present through the Holy Spirit. We can have a significant role in healing from injury, promoting justice in relationships, and providing settings for the actual experience of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. But it is hard work that requires spiritual labor, humility, and courage.

An immediate problem is that often the theology and practice of forgiveness among contemporary Protestants, including in many believers churches, are framed in individualistic terms. An individual sits or stands alone before God in public worship, receiving communion, privately confessing sin and seeking forgiveness, privately confessing pain and seeking healing. Depending on the nature of the offense and its conspicuousness, a pastor may "need to get involved." In North America where we imbibe cultural values that emphasize the desires and rights of the self and privacy when it involves sex or money, confessing specific sins or describing our wounds is not only uncomfortable, but also seems in bad taste. Room for the Christian community to address injury shrinks comparatively.

However, when we marginalize the role of the Christian community and its representatives in the mission of restorative justice, we not only let injured ones remain isolated in their pain and allow those who abuse others to avoid facing the impact of their actions or to rationalize them, but we also hinder both from having the eventual experience of forgiveness. In a Christian perspective, healing from injury and healing from sin are spiritual realities. Spiritual healing takes place in the context of Christian worship, community life, and mission. For this to occur the church must provide adequate spiritual space and practical structures that invite and support healing from abuse, admonishment of sin, confession and repentance, forgiving, and the celebration of movement toward reconciliation.

Accompanying the injured. As a companion of those who have been injured, the church can play a significant role in affirming that an abused person's sense of shame is false and agreeing that those who injure should be brought to account. Catholic religious social ethicist Christine Gudorf has pointed out that both victims and those who see themselves as potential victims often have trouble with trust and need to develop a

sense of safety in relation to others. The church can have a strong role "in restoring the capacity of victims to trust" by being trustworthy itself.[42]

The church can play a further role in empowering those who are injured, especially in situations where an offender has access to social, economic, or institutional power and the injured one has much less. In addition, the silence that frequently surrounds sexual violations enhances the power of the one who abuses. Therefore, breaking the silence or breaking out of the isolation of the offender-injured relationship is often a significant step toward correcting imbalances in power that disadvantage and bind the injured ones. This is a step toward greater justice in the relationship but also a step toward healing and transformation for both injured and injurer.

When there has been abuse but pastors, parents, or other members of the Christian community do not believe abuse has occurred, or make light of it, or do not legitimate someone's blame, the injured one is even more disempowered than had she remained silent. In cases where the injured one does not know how to say no to an offender (Ann as a child) or is unable to articulate hurt, especially in those cases in which the perpetrator does not stop the offense or does not feel morally responsible, it is doubly important for the Christian community to stand with and advocate for the injured one.

Christians who walk alongside the injured should respect their psychological and spiritual healing process, exercising patience. While the disciples may have needed forty days to mourn and adjust to the loss of the earthly Jesus before his ascension, some who suffer injury may need forty years to mourn and adjust to all they lost at the hands of those who did violence to them.[43] To assist in the process of mourning, the church can and must provide spiritual and emotional space for lament within the larger worshiping life of congregations. At the same time, we should recognize that psychological considerations can at times be used as an excuse by injured ones to avoid the necessary pain of the healing process or to rationalize "not forgiving." As companions of the injured, the Christian community also has a role in nurturing their disposition toward forgiveness.

Accompanying those who have injured others. The Christian community also has a responsibility to accompany sinners. On the one hand, this means confronting those who injure others, making clear the wrongness of their acts in relation to God's intentions for human life. This means

42. Gudorf, *Victimization*, 93.

43. Rolheiser implies this in his description, *The Holy Longing*, 150-153. In this chapter he counsels patience in dealing with anger and loss, but also says that there is time for those who have experienced loss to move beyond the "40 days."

specifically naming such acts, not simply speaking in abstractions, which is tempting to do when sexual sins are involved. Theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas has emphasized the importance of acknowledging sin before others: "We are seldom in a position to know the truth about our sin until we make our lives available to others in such a way that we may be taught the truth about ourselves."[44]

On the other hand, this means making space for repentant offenders to experience transformation through the renewing power of human and divine forgiveness and acceptance. If the ones they have injured cannot forgive them, are not ready to hear their genuine confession and observe their repentance, or are no longer living, other members of the church can receive their confession, thereby allowing the injurer to experience God's forgiveness through the congregation's or its representatives' own accepting love. In Christian perspective it is not the case that only an injured one can forgive an offender.[45] The grace of God and God's church are not held hostage by the inability of injured ones to forgive repentant offenders.

In the act of acknowledging sin, offenders must also deal with shame. But theirs is an appropriate shame. The church is responsible to help monitor the behaviors of abusers as well as to help reestablish relationships of trust with the Christian community that have been shamefully betrayed. Linking Christian discipline and forgiveness is assumed in the reconciling process outlined in Matthew 18. While church discipline has far too often been practiced in judgmental rather than forgiving ways, causing many who have experienced it this way to abandon church discipline altogether, there are also hope-filled accounts of Christian transformation through responsible admonishment, repentance, and forgiveness.[46]

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44. Stanley Hauerwas, "Why Truthfulness Requires Forgiveness: A Commencement Address for Graduates of a College of the Church of the Second Chance," (unpublished manuscript of address given at Goshen College, Goshen, Ind., April 1992; copy in the Mennonite Historical Library there), 11.

45. Here I differ from those who assert that "only victims have the right to confer forgiveness on their abusers."—Christopher Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 264. I base this understanding partly on the image of the church as the body of Christ on earth. The church has been given the responsibility to bind and loose, as representatives of God offering forgiveness—but not lightly—to the repentant, especially in cases where it is impossible for victims or survivors of abuse to offer it to the offender directly, as when the victim has not been able to take steps toward forgiveness or is now dead.

46. Experience with sexual abuse of church leaders in the Mennonite Church led to a critique of the reconciling process listed in Matthew 18. Because of the fact that women, children, and the elderly who have been targets of abuse usually had much less social, economic, and institutional power than those who abused them, it seemed uncaring and unjust to expect them to face their abuser(s) alone as Matthew 18 recommends as a first step in the reconciling process. One corrective was to move immediately to involve others from the church in confronting abusers. Another was to protect the names of those abused

When a congregation or denomination is faced specifically with sexual sin and shame, the group and its leaders may need to address their own attitudes toward sexuality, bodies, gender relations, and privacy as they seek to foster God's saving work in the community. McClintock points out that there are, in fact, humorless, controlling, "shame-bound congregations" who are not well-prepared to be healing communities and need to address their own underlying beliefs and systemic practices before they can be good companions with either abusers or the abused.[47]

Perhaps most important, the church has a *proactive* role in teaching and forming its members in living responsibly so that healing and forgiveness are less frequently necessary.[48] This means that church leaders must be comfortable with their own sexuality and be educated in both theological and cultural matters dealing with sex and sexuality.

In summary, for the Christian church to have a significant role in the grace of healing and forgiveness for those perpetrating or suffering from sexual sins or other injuries, it cannot silently condone the actions of offenders or abandon those who are injured. To accompany them well the church will need to press against strong cultural currents rooted in the value of individual freedom. Church leaders should expect such reactions as "Who are you to tell me what to think or do?" "Ethics are a private matter." "Don't meddle with my life." "You're a sinner too."

Mennonites have a strong heritage that values Christian community and ethical living. That heritage includes an understanding and practice of church that includes not only preaching, the administration of sacraments, and missionary love, but also mutual admonition and loving service to one another for the sake of Christ and the new world he envisioned. However, these dimensions of church cannot and will not remain alive in this cultural context without explicit leadership and care.

The Christian church is a holy church, not because the institution or its members never sin—indeed, only an ideal, ahistorical, disembodied church would never sin. We should not therefore expect to see a church "without spot or wrinkle." The church is holy because God has given to the church the ongoing gift of the Holy Spirit—God's own presence—who continues to draw us toward holiness. The fruits of the Spirit mark a community that, even when it fails in some respects and situations—

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from public awareness when indicated, especially in sexually shame-based cultures and congregations where exposure could result in further shaming and hurt to the injured ones.

47. McClintock, *Sexual Shame*, 123-124.

48. Karen A. McClintock's *Preventing Sexual Abuse in Congregations: A Resource for Leaders* (Herndon, Va.: Alban Institute, 2004) is one example among others that takes this approach.

including its practice of discipline—still retains the vision and power to seek justice, heal the brokenhearted, and forgive sin, and it is doing so.[49]

The divine grace and human practice of offering restorative justice for both the injured and the injurers is an antidote to the fear and mistrust that pervade relationships and communities seared by moral injury, including sexual sins. Empowered by God, Christians can tell friends and neighbors the truth of their lives, a precursor to saving work. For, as Stanley Hauerwas warned, unless we humans are able to tell one another the truth, "we are condemned to live in a world of violence and destruction." But Christians can live with hope and joy even in that kind of world. We can do so because as a people we have been constituted by the practices of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. "These practices make truth possible, and with truth emerges the seed for peace among women and men on earth."[50]

49. Mennonite Church responses from the 1970s to 2015 to John H. Yoder's sexual abuses are one example of serious, flawed, painful, and healing attempts at restorative justice. For a provocative Mennonite discussion within an ecumenical context of the church as "holy" and whether the church as an institution might be able to repent for its acts in previous centuries, see Jeremy Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Pasts* (London: T&T Clark International, 2011).

50. Hauerwas, "Why Truthfulness Requires Forgiveness," 20.