

Running head: FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION: AN INTEGRATION

Forgiveness and Reconciliation:
An Integrated Approach to Christian Counseling
Martin L. Dignard
Regent University

Abstract

Christians recognize that Jesus clearly commanded them to forgive everyone, and forgiveness needs to be unconditional and unending; however, reconciliation sometimes requires wisdom and discretion. For practitioners of inner healing, forgiveness takes place on the emotional level, and reconciliation is sometimes a result. In the mental health field, most therapists recognize forgiveness as a positive intervention for dealing with offenses, and it can enhance a client's psychological well-being. Reconciliation in a committed relationship is positive, but there are cautions for those clients who may not recognize a harmful relationship. The Christian counselor has little trouble integrating forgiveness and reconciliation with the mental health profession because they are sound interventions for helping clients who are open to them.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation: An Integrated Approach to Christian Counseling

It is impossible to be in the counseling profession for very long without dealing with the results of hurt, offense, and the need for forgiveness or reconciliation. As Wade, Bailey, and Shaffer (2005) have pointed out, “people often come to therapy to deal with symptoms related to some type of offense, hurt, or trauma. Even clients whose presenting issues do not include a serious offense often report hurtful experiences later in therapy” (p. 634). In this aspect, both Christian and secular therapists must help clients find freedom from past hurts. As Christians recognize that the Bible is the foundation for matters of faith, and as mental health professionals look to scientific support for their clients’ wellness, the Christian counselor looks to both faith and science for a means to help those who seek healing. Even lay counselors in the Church, who practice inner healing, stress the need for forgiveness on a deep emotional level. This paper will show that forgiveness and reconciliation are necessary for the growth and health of the person seeking freedom from presenting hurts in the arenas of Scripture, inner healing, and counseling.

Biblical Perspective

Forgiveness

The strongest passages in the Bible on forgiving one another are found in chapters 6 and 18 of the book of Matthew. In the first passage, Jesus gave the expanded version of the Lord’s prayer, which ended with the following caution: “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Mat. 6:14-15, New American Standard Version). In this statement, Jesus made forgiveness towards other people a requirement for those who desire grace and mercy in their own lives, for their own actions. This is an amazing statement, considering that forgiveness from God is a central doctrine of the Christian faith.

In the second passage, Jesus responded to Peter's inquiry on how many times he should forgive his brother in a single day: "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (Mat. 18:22). Although there is debate on whether this means 77 times or 490 times, the intent remains the same—disciples should always forgive. In the remainder of this passage, Jesus expressed the seriousness of this statement with a parable of two slaves who both owed money—the first owed a fortune to the king, and the second owed a much smaller debt to the first slave. When the first slave begged for mercy, the king forgave the entire debt, leaving the slave owing nothing; however, when the second slave begged for mercy, the first slave did not forgive the debt but had the slave thrown into prison. When this became known to the king, the first slave was rebuked, sent to prison, and tortured. The warning of this passage is clear: those who do not forgive others will suffer for it. It is usually accepted that this suffering refers to the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual side effects of holding on to bitterness and anger and that Jesus commanded his disciples to forgive so they would not experience these effects.

Reconciliation

The clearest passage in the Bible on the subject of reconciliation is also found in the book of Matthew. In the fifth chapter, Jesus commanded his followers to seek reconciliation whenever possible:

Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. (Mat. 5:23-24)

It needs to be noted that this passage seems to indicate that the person seeking reconciliation is the one who caused the offense, for the other person had "something against" the one who went. Thus, this passage does not necessarily require that a victim return to a harmful situation.

Another passage in the Bible that may apply to the subject of reconciliation is also in the book of Matthew. Directly after a warning not to judge others, Jesus gave his disciples important advice on the subject of boundaries: “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces” (Mat. 7:6). In this passage, Jesus made clear to his followers that living in faith and love does not require them to constantly place themselves in situations where unnecessary rejection and hurt are probable; instead, they should be wise when it comes to vulnerability and trust.

Balance

In these passages, Jesus made it clear that Christians must forgive others, and there is no limit to the extent of this forgiveness. As well as requiring it, he stated that there are severe consequences and side effects for those who do not forgive; however, reconciliation does not seem to be as clearly unconditional. Although it is not directly stated, there is some reason to believe that a certain amount of wisdom is expected when relationships and trust are involved.

Inner Healing Perspective

Forgiveness

The importance of forgiveness is understood by those who help people through inner healing, which is sometimes called healing of memories. As well as affirming that forgiveness is commanded in scripture, most inner healing practitioners recognize it as a vital part of healing. Payne (1991) has stated that “healing of memories [or inner healing] means forgiveness of sin” (p. 68), and this refers to sins committed by the client and sins committed against the client. Payne identified that the three greatest barriers to wholeness are (a) the failure to gain self-acceptance, (b) the failure to forgive others, and (c) the failure to receive forgiveness, and “the failure to forgive another is a most formidable barrier to wholeness” (p. 81).

The process of forgiveness in inner healing often requires that the client get as closely in touch with the pain of the originating offense as possible. Sometimes, the client needs help to recognize that there is unforgiveness remaining, which is then confessed as sin against God and against others. Payne (1991) reported that victims of childhood abuse will often find it difficult to accept that the parent actually did anything wrong; this realization has to be reached for healing to be possible. When the client has faced the offense openly and honestly, prayer is offered up for the hurt to be healed, and guided imagery may be used to connect the cognitive and emotive faculties.

Reconciliation

Restoration of broken relationships is often seen as a resulting product of inner healing, but that is usually not the focus. The client who has just gone through inner healing may have touched deep areas of pain and may be in a very sensitive and vulnerable state. At this point, there may be confusion and uncertainty concerning the damaged relationship and whether it is harmful or helpful. The practitioner's personal viewpoint can easily sway the client, and this is a grave concern; it is impossible to tell how much damage has occurred because bad advice was received by someone who could not discern its validity. Therefore, it is important for anybody seeking inner healing to be certain of the wisdom and beliefs of the practitioner.

Balance

Inner healing is often seen as the joining of scriptural truth with lay counseling. Although the professional counselor may be wary of this practice, many people who would not go to a therapist receive real help through inner healing. The best balance is maintained when the focus is on confessing sin, forgiving others, and receiving forgiveness. Advice on reconciliation is best left with those whom the client recognizes as having wisdom and perspective.

Mental Health Perspective

Forgiveness

Although the topic of forgiveness is a major theme in the Christian faith, “psychological treatments of forgiving have been rare until recently” (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachel, 1997, p. 321). The most likely reason for this omission is that it was considered to be in the arena of religion and the clergy; however, an increasing number of therapists have been called upon to fulfill roles that were considered pastoral in nature (Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990). The majority of research on forgiveness in the psychology or counseling fields has been in the last 20 years though there are earlier references to it in the mental health field (e.g., Lake, 1966, p. 322).

As Berry and Worthington (2001) pointed out, “a growing body of evidence links chronic states of unforgiveness (including anger and hostility) to adverse health outcomes . . . [and] researchers have proposed that forgiveness should be associated with benefits to physical and mental health” (p. 447). Wade et al. (2005) reported that “not only does talking about forgiveness help clients to cope with their specific hurts but it appears to be related to increased symptom improvement as well” (p. 637). Thus, research in the mental health field supports the hypothesis that forgiveness reduces suffering.

Once forgiveness has been discussed with the client, there is usually a process that must be followed before it is completed; few people can immediately go from deciding to forgive to actually having done it. However, most therapists identify the process differently. Wade and Worthington (2005) examined different models and identified six common interventions among them: (a) defining forgiveness, (b) recalling the hurt, (c) building empathy, (d) acknowledging own offenses, (e) committing to forgiveness, and (f) overcoming unforgiveness. Worthington and DiBlasio (1990), examining forgiveness in a committed relationship where both parties were

seeking forgiveness, advised the clients to (a) reflect on their own culpability, (b) apologize for their own hurtful actions, (c) hear the other person's perspective, and (d) understand that the process may take time. In all cases, accepting personal responsibility, facing the pain, and making a choice to forgive was required.

However, "not all clinicians agree that promoting forgiveness with clients is the most appropriate, ethical, or therapeutic route to take" because it may reinforce already self-destructive attitudes or behavior (Wade et al., 2005, p. 635). This is a caution that should not be ignored, for forgiveness has not always been understood the same way by different parts of the Christian Church or by different practitioners in the mental health field. For this reason, it is important that the counselor discuss with the client what forgiveness does and does not mean when introducing it in therapy (Enright et al., 1991, p. 493). Thankfully, there is some consensus of definition in the mental health field:

Most [clinicians researching the application of forgiveness interventions] agree that forgiveness is primarily an intrapersonal process, in which those who have been hurt release negative thoughts and feelings for the offending person and gain some measure of acceptance for the events. (Wade et al., p. 634)

Reconciliation

Where forgiveness involves releasing any negative feelings towards the offender, reconciliation involves renewing and restoring the relationship (Enright et al., 1991, p. 493). It is important for a therapist to explain to a client the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation:

[Confusing the two] may lead to irresponsibly encouraging clients either to accept abusive situations or to retain the angry and resentful emotions to protect from future

harm. However . . . forgiveness can occur and the victim can still hold the offender accountable, see the offender in realistic terms, and make wise decision about whether to return to the relationship. (Wade & Worthington, 2005, p. 165)

Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, and Kluwer (2003) have shown that forgiveness and reconciliation in a client's significant relationships usually enhance the client's psychological well-being; however, caution must be applied to clients whose sensitivity towards others may already result in poor boundaries and greater potential for personal harm (Wade & Worthington, 2005).

Reconciliation is especially necessary when committed relationships have been damaged. Worthington and DiBlasio (1990) compared a broken relationship with a broken arm and stated that when reconciliation has taken place, "the reunited relationship, fortified through mutual forgiveness, may have more strength than prior to the break" (p. 219). However, unlike many researchers in the mental health field, they stressed the importance of having the client (a) ask others for forgiveness for hurts inflicted on them and (b) try to avoid causing future hurts to others. These are significant parts of the reconciliation process, and they should not be ignored.

Balance

It is important for counselors to recognize the part that forgiveness and reconciliation play in the healing and overall mental health of a client. The process of releasing negative emotions towards the offender and replacing those with positive feelings may not be an easy or quick one, but the results are both beneficial and verifiable. It is always important to clarify with the client what forgiveness does and what it does not mean so that there is no confusion; also, it is important that the client become completely in touch with the extent of the injury and the associated anger before trying to forgive so that it does not become a vehicle for denial.

Reconciliation with the offender is usually desirable, but wisdom must be taken in that regard: it is not in the client's best interest to return to a relationship that is actually or potentially harmful. Extra care should be taken when the client's sensitivity, self-image, or desire for relationship results in insufficient boundaries against others who may cause further harm. In those cases, it may be more prudent to concentrate on helping the client build better personal boundaries before addressing negative feelings towards the offender; nevertheless, it is never beneficial to the client to hold on to resentment, anger, and bitterness.

Conclusion

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus clearly commanded his followers to forgive all who have offended them, whether intentional or unintentional; furthermore, this forgiveness needs to be unconditional and unending. This is required because believers are forgiven for everything they have done, without limitation. Reconciliation, however, is not as universally required, so there is reason to use wisdom and discretion with relationships that may be harmful; the only time it is required is when the person asked for reconciliation is the one who has done the offending. In the practice of inner healing, forgiveness is experienced on the emotional level. Reconciliation is usually not a focus for healing of memories although it is sometimes a byproduct. In the mental health field, forgiveness is recognized by most therapists as a positive intervention for helping clients deal with hurts, traumas, and offenses, and it enhances psychological well-being. Reconciliation between committed partners in a relationship is also a positive result, but there are cautions for those clients who may not recognize that a relationship is harmful and who may not have sufficient personal boundaries. In these areas, the Christian counselor has little trouble integrating faith with the science of the mental health profession, and both forgiveness and reconciliation are sound interventions for helping clients who are open to these options.

References

- Aquino, K., Tripp, T. M., & Bies, R. J. (2006). Getting even or moving on? Power, procedural justice, and types of offense as predictors of revenge, forgiveness, reconciliation, and avoidance in organizations. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 91*(3), 653-668.
- Berry, J. W., & Worthington, E. L. Jr. (2001). Forgiveness, relationship quality, stress while imagining relationship events, and physical and mental health. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 48*(4), 447-455.
- Enright, R., Freedman, S., Gassin, E., Golden, S., Hollander, G., Lambert, P., et al. (1991). Five points on the construct of forgiveness within psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy, 28*(3), 493-496.
- Karremans, J. C., Van Lange, P. A. M., Ouwerkerk, J. W., & Kluwer, E. S. (2003). When forgiving enhances psychological well-being: The role of interpersonal commitment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*(5), 1011-1026.
- Lake, F. (1966). *Clinical theology: A theological and psychiatric basis to clinical pastoral care*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd.
- McCullough, M. E., Sandage, S. J., & Worthington, E. L. Jr. (1997). *To forgive is human: How to put your past in the past*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- McCullough, M. E., Worthington, E. L. Jr., & Rachal, K. C. (1997). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73*(2), 321-336.
- Payne, L. (1991). *Restoring the Christian soul: Overcoming barriers to completion in Christ through healing prayer*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

- Wade, N. G., & Worthington, E. L. Jr. (2005). In search of a common core: A content analysis of interventions to promote forgiveness. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 42(2), 160-177.
- Wade, N. G., Bailey, D. C., & Shaffer, P. (2005). Helping clients heal: Does forgiveness make a difference? *Professional psychology: Research and practice*, 36(6), 634-641.
- Worthington, E. L. Jr. (Ed.). (1993). *Psychotherapy and religious values*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Worthington, E. L. Jr. (Ed.). (1996). *Christian marital counseling: Eight approaches to helping couples*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Worthington, E. L. Jr. (1999). *Hope-focused marriage counseling: A guide to brief therapy*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Worthington, E. L. Jr., & DiBlasio, F. A. (1990). Promoting mutual forgiveness within the fractured relationship. *Psychotherapy*, 27(2), 219-223.
- Worthington, E. L. Jr., & Sandage, S. J. (2001). Religion and spirituality. *Psychotherapy*, 38(4), 473-478.