

A Conversation About Forgiveness

Implications for Our Personal and Corporate Lives



James Londis, moderator

Bev Sedlacek, Richard Rice, Linda Gilbert, and Kent Hansen

Editor's Note

Great conversations deserve to be shared, so it gives us pleasure to introduce the participants in our roundtable discussion on forgiveness that took place via teleconference during National Forgiveness Week in January 2000.

Our panel included: moderator James Londis, director of ethics and corporate integrity at Kettering Medical Center Network, Kettering, Ohio; Linda Gilbert, psychologist and CEO, Alannah Foster Family Agency, Corona, California; Kent Hansen, attorney, Corona, California; Richard Rice, professor of religion, Loma Linda University; Bev Sedlacek, counselor, Into His Rest Ministry, Weimar, California.

"The Forgiveness Factor" was the cover story in *Christianity Today* that month. Richard Rice was prepping to give a forgiveness lecture funded by the Templeton Foundation. Bev Sedlacek was scheduled to give seminars on forgiveness in California and England. There was talk of Scripture, books, and other media, as well as experience. *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* by L. Gregory Jones captured the attention of the two theologians on the panel—Londis and Rice.

The discussion predated the pope's Day of Forgiveness sermon in March, so there was no mention of that event.

As in all good conversations, there were surprises and diversions as comments sparked new ideas in the participants' minds, and Londis led the group through concepts involved with personal and social forgiveness.

Londis: To get us started, let me make the following observations. As I see it, forgiveness may be personal or social, an act or a way of being toward the world. Forgiveness as a personal act suggests at least three things: (a) I forgive someone else, (b) I ask another person to forgive me, or (c) I forgive "myself," a relatively new idea that is one of the concerns of modern therapy. In Christian thought, we might add "confession" and "repentance" to our conversation and ask: How does the religious understanding of personal forgiveness differ from secular forgiveness, especially the kind encountered in therapy?

One thing that struck me while reading L. Gregory Jones's book *Embodying Forgiveness* is his claim that the typical therapeutic approach to forgiveness lacks a strong concept of sin. It focuses more on a person's feeling better about himself than on reconciling broken relationships and creating community where there hasn't been community before.

Sedlacek: I agree.

Londis: The other piece of this, which I believe is related to both personal and social forgiveness, is eschatology, the conviction that history will ultimately come out as God intends. There will be judgment, there will be accountability, and there will be ultimate victory over evil, violence, and death. In the absence of such eschatological faith, personal forgiveness may not mean much. In other words, the Christian's "guarantee" of ultimate victory over evil is what makes me willing to accept the suffering inherent in either receiving or giving forgiveness. That's one of the insights I picked up from the first half of the book, which is all that I have read. Rick you're going to have to help us, because I understand that you've read it all.

Rice: Well, Jones provides the most thorough, careful analysis of the whole range of forgiveness, theologically, that I've seen. It is a solid piece of work. However, one of the important things that I find missing from it, maybe more a tone than a specific note,

is the sense of release, gratitude, and joy that being forgiven brings.

He does talk about the Church needing to explore what it means to be the forgiven community. He quotes Stanley Hauerwas as saying that this is the greater task of the Church—not to be the forgiving community but the forgiven one. I don't think that is realized very effectively in the Church. The most fundamental aspect of forgiveness from a Christian standpoint is the realization that a sense of being forgiven is basic to the spirit of forgiveness that you extend to others. I don't find that in Jones. He makes some points very effectively, but his discussion doesn't convey the sense of freedom that forgiveness provides.

Sedlacek: To understand the act of forgiveness, I think you have to see it from God's point of view. It makes the most sense, humanly speaking, in the context of the Great Controversy, using Adventist language.

Rice: That's an important point. The logic of forgiveness is not apparent. You've got to look at a specific situation, or a story or work of art, to see the logic of forgiveness. But if you try to tell two hostile parties that the solution to their problem is forgiveness, you're going to have a hard time justifying it within the framework of their present understanding. You have to recast the whole relationship.

Londis: It also seems to me that forgiveness, by its very nature, is demanding of us a repudiation of power—of dominance.

Rice: Right.

Londis: The one who initiates forgiveness appears to assume the posture of vulnerability, because the other can say, "I don't want your forgiveness." Whether I try to forgive someone else or ask for forgiveness, I am basically assuming a position of vulnerability and repudiating the power position.

Gilbert: I think that's true, because anger is a very powerful emotion. Sometimes when I'm working with my clients one of the things that I do to help them "give up their anger," so to speak, is to try to help them look at the consequences to their own personal life. Even though anger is powerful, the person who is angry suffers a great deal while remaining angry.

Londis: It also seems to me that the "logic of forgiveness," to use Rick's phrase, is that I am seeking to

make every enemy a potential brother or sister, whereas the logic of power and retaliation is to basically make of every brother or sister a potential enemy. That's the genius of the Sermon on the Mount. It is trying to break down the logic by which the world generally operates, socially and personally.

Hansen: I like what Richard Foster says about this in his book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. He says that forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean we forget what happened. "Forgiveness means that this real and horrible offense shall not separate us. Forgiveness means that we will no longer use the offense to drive a wedge between us, hurting and injuring one another" (188).

Rice: It's significant that in the Sermon on the Mount, the model of forgiveness that Jesus appeals to—love your enemies—is God's perspective on people. You don't have what might be called an "ethic of reciprocity," according to which you treat others the way they treat you. Jesus specifically rejects that and says that if you want to be children of your Father in Heaven, you must treat them as God does. Then Jesus talks about the benefit that everybody enjoys because God is gracious.

An important theme also comes out of Mark 2, where Jesus forgives the paralytic. Jesus' critics say, "God alone can forgive." If forgiveness is really something that God does, then to the extent that we forgive others, we are participating in God's act and extending the forgiveness that God offers. Now you psychologists will have to help me, but it seems to me that this is a relief for an individual to not have to develop within himself/herself all the resources of charity and forbearance that enable that person to be forgiving. Instead, the person becomes the vehicle by which God's own forgiveness is offered to other people.

Gilbert: When a person forgives a wrong, it goes beyond something that is human nature and what normal humans would do.

Rice: Like Bev said, there's a transcendent quality to it.

Hansen: You can't read Jesus' great statements on

FORGIVE THE INSULT.

Once upon a summer fiery,
as I sit listing through my diary
of daily episodes
burgeoning into accepted truths,
I try to burn away the vestiges
of sinful thinking and
vicarious remorse.
The floating jetsam of twilight
mildly wraps me in its patched mantle
of appeasement fashioned for oblivion.
The palpitating shafts of gloomy light
penetrate into the secret depths of soul,
so hopelessly out of tune with what I feel.
The pain of that ungainly insult
still lashes me in its recurrent ghastly haunts.
But Jesus says: do not forget, but do forgive!

Vladimir Orlov

forgiveness in Matthew 5:18 and Mark 11 without seeing transcendence. He links it to the flow of the Kingdom and efficacy of prayer. If there is unforgiveness, it chains us to the past and hinders God working in the present moment for us and through us. It makes the past our future.

In Mark 11, Jesus curses a fig tree for not bearing out of season, which would be an unnatural act. When Peter notices that the tree died, Jesus uses that to illustrate the power of prayer to alter circumstances, but he conditions this power upon forgiveness to permit the freedom for change. As Christ forgave me to reconcile me to God and open the new creation, so I must forgive my sister and brother to enable the Kingdom of God to grow. This is genuine transcendence through the elimination of spiritual and emotional barriers to life and growth.

Sedlacek: I personally believe that I don't have a forgiving gene in my body. It is a transaction that happens from the transcendent plane to the human. Forgiveness is part of God's love nature. Forgiveness is a gift that he gives me as part of his love. My part in it is my willingness to receive this gift.

One of the exciting insights that I have come to see is that because I am made in God's image, God planted in my bosom a sense of mercy and justice. The emphasis of these two is on God's mercy extended to me as a sinner. However, as a victim, I need justice.

I work a lot with abused women and their cry is, "I



Photo by Thomas Osborn

need justice." So when you're talking about forgiveness, yes, I know I'm a sinner, especially as it relates to my sinful responses toward people who hurt me, so I need God's mercy. However, I also need justice for what was done to me. Justice requires bloodshed, and that is what my heart cries for in response to injustices. Nothing less than death will satisfy my need for justice.

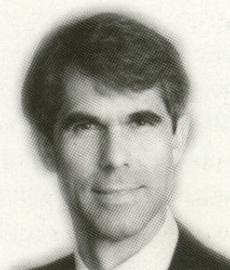
The good news of the gospel is that as I look at the cross, my need for justice is satisfied. Christ says to me, "I have paid the price for sin and justice is satisfied in me. Let me give it to you." The justice looks like this: Christ took on the sins of the world and so, as the party who is offended, he says to me, "You are right I did hurt you and you do need justice. I am willing to pay the price. I am sorry that I hurt you. You are right, I am worthy of death as your perpetrator. Please take my life to satisfy your need for justice." As I nail him to the cross to satisfy my need for justice, he prays, "Father

to her and her feelings about it. I discovered this in my own personal journey: I was sexually abused as a child and was quite angry with my perpetrator. I needed to have the mercy of Christ extended to me because of my sinful response of wanting to hurt him as I was hurt. I also needed to forgive him. However, I also needed to have justice satisfied. For years, the lack of resolution I felt was in not having my sense of justice satisfied.

Londis: Now do you mean by justice, a sense of punishment on the perpetrator?

Sedlacek: I mean a sense that the offense rendered against me did not go unnoticed. Forgiveness is more than letting go of the offense. How is justice taken care of? What is the resolving note, a sense of fairness?

Londis: Well, is it possible that justice in a situation like that simply means that the perpetrator must confront and be confronted with the reality of what he has done?



YOU'VE GOT TO LOOK AT A SPECIFIC SITUATION, OR A STORY OR WORK OF ART, TO SEE THE LOGIC OF FORGIVENESS. —RICK RICE

forgive her for she knows not what she is doing." Mercy is then extended to me. The transaction is complete.

This has been an exciting revelation of the completeness of the plan of salvation. It brings to light the truth that I am guilty of killing Christ because of my need for justice. Therefore, in seeking to understand this whole issue of forgiveness, it cannot be limited just to one's own personal point of view, but should be seen from God's point of view. He has everything that I need: justice and mercy.

Londis: Let me ask a question of you, Bev. Are you suggesting that a woman who is suffering from domestic violence gets her sense of justice against her perpetrator satisfied if she looks at what happened to Jesus on the Cross, and that she therefore finds it easier to forgive her abuser?

Sedlacek: Yes, and I hope you're not asking more than that. In other words, are you saying that she can therefore stay and put up with it?

Londis: No, no.

Sedlacek: Okay, okay.

Londis: When someone who suffers domestic violence is asked to forgive a perpetrator, what is it that she is being asked to do? What in concrete terms is that supposed to do for her?

Sedlacek: How I would answer that is, first of all she would have to embrace the reality of what happened

Sedlacek: No. Justice is not found in confronting the perpetrator. While there may be a need and even opportunity, it is not necessary to get justice. Christ has the justice that I need. I point my clients to him to have the resolution complete.

Gilbert: I think that when a person is in an abusive situation and she remains angry, the belief behind the anger is, "You have no right to treat me this way. You have to change. You have to be different." It is a very dogmatic and powerful emotion. It is not until one can say, "Look you're an abusive person, you'll probably always be an abusive person. It's now time for me to care enough about myself to get out of this." Not in an angry way, but just, "I'm not going to tolerate this anymore."

Is that forgiveness? I don't know. In that situation, there are lots of things that have to be forgiven. Maybe part of forgiveness is that I forgive myself and accept the fact that I was weak enough to tolerate that kind of treatment for so long, and now I'm not going to do that anymore.

Rice: I was just wondering what we do with the anger business. There is a whole range of situations to which we apply the word forgiveness, and the application and experience may be quite different to each of them. For a woman who has been abused or someone who has been abused as a child, or for a victim of a

violent crime, forgiveness will be different from that of someone who suffers less severely.

Another application of forgiveness is one we find in the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians, where Paul, according to one translation, says, "Love keeps no score of wrongs." He is encouraging an attitude where people are not quick to take offense. They are not calculating all the slights that they have suffered, the things that people have done to them. They don't worry about all of that. I'd say that is a different kind of forgiveness from people who have to wrestle with traumatic events in their lives. These people can't just say, "I'm not worried about that," because it has had an effect on them. Unless they come to terms with it, they're not going to move beyond and become whole persons.

Londis: One of the things that Jones criticizes in the beginning of his book is this concept of "cheap grace," and he uses Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a model. Jones feels that Bonhoeffer embodies forgiveness in a way that few have in the twentieth century. I suspect that Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi would also qualify as "embodiments." Bonhoeffer was unwilling to abandon the German Church even when it had failed to resist fascism. He took the risk of forgiving the Church while being critical of it and the Nazi regime. Jones believes that, by staying there and seeking to effect some kind of reconciliation, by trying to break Germany out of its delusions with Hitler and get it back on course as a truly Christian community, Bonhoeffer embodied true Christian forgiveness.

But if the point of forgiveness is reconciliation, that can't happen unless there is a change of behavior on the part of the perpetrator and a true, deep sorrow for what has happened.

Gilbert: Sometimes that change in behavior has to happen in another relationship. Or it may not happen at all. I think that we are optimistic to imply that every person has the willingness or the ability to change.

Londis: Let's take a father who has sexually abused his daughter. When she is an adult, a confrontation occurs and a family explosion results. It seems to me that the father and daughter can only be reconciled if he truly understands what's happened, expresses tremendous remorse for it, and changes his behavior. There may never be a recovery from the scars, but the potential is there for the father and the daughter to enjoy a breakthrough in their relationship and begin something new and different. On the other hand, with pedophiles, who supposedly can never be cured, one can only hope that even if they can't change the way they feel, they will stop their behavior.

Rice: I think you touched on something that forgiveness inherently involves or requires, drawing on what you said about God—the capacity to view the perpetrator of what you have suffered in some other context than in just what they have done. I don't think forgiveness is possible without that capacity to transcend or look beyond, or move beyond the victim-perpetrator relationship.

Londis: How about Bev and Linda, do you agree with that?

Gilbert: Personally, I encourage people to forgive almost out of a selfish motive: because their lives will be better if they quit dwelling on this horrible thing that happened when they were young. If you are talking about a woman who forgives her father when she is now an adult, hopefully, part of the reason that she forgives is because she will feel better about herself and be able to get on with her life better after she forgives.

I think that choosing to forgive someone and that other person feeling remorse for the act she did are two completely separate events that may never be connected to each other. In other words, I can forgive someone for hurting me and that person may never feel sorrow for what she did. But I am still going to be better off if I forgive.

Londis: That's the point of this *Christianity Today* article on the research that's being done on the healing effects of forgiveness for the forgiver.

Rice: That's been the focus of a lot of the studies that I've read. There is no question that there is a value to that and a logic to it. I heard a rape survivor on television say, "I'm going to forgive the guy who did this to me, because I don't want him to continue to have control over my life." She was not surrendering power, but asserting power. She was saying, "I am not a victim of circumstances. In spite of what you've done, I still have my life and what you did to me is not going to be allowed to dominate it."

Hansen: I agree with Linda. Matthew 18 points out that forgiveness is for the forgiver. The servant there is forgiven the equivalent of the national debt by his master. Yet he turns around and refuses to forgive his own debtor a petty amount and jails him to boot. The master learns about the merciless servant and turns him over to the tormentors until he forgives. When we do not forgive, we remain imprisoned and tortured by the past. Forgiveness is the key to freedom and growth. When we don't forgive, we padlock a chain from the past to our heart and with every movement we irritate the wound. We are in torment.

Sedlacek: I'd like to challenge the idea that forgiveness needs to happen just from a selfish view. Again,

I'm thinking in terms of God's point of view. The question is: What's best for the other person? Feeling good about myself and being set free are by-products. They need not be the motivation. Once again, forgiveness is a transaction that happens at the heart level with God and me. I may need to really wrestle with God to get his view.

Oswald Chambers talks about intercessory prayer. He says that few people understand it. It's getting God's mind about the person. I see forgiveness the same way. It's getting God's mind about that person and understanding that the seed in that person is also the seed in me. So because I understand it that way, then I want God's view of what's best for that person. When I choose that, it's automatically going to be best for me.

Londis: A sense of the power of sin in human existence helps, too. Somebody once said to me, "Hurt people hurt people." Although I don't like the idea of

Christianity Today article: Is forgiveness something that must be fulfilled in reconciliation? Or is it a discrete act, and reconciliation something totally different?

Lewis B. Smede argues that they are separate, so it is appropriate to focus on forgiveness and what happens to the person who does the forgiving. But I think that Jones is insisting that you really haven't gotten a handle on what forgiveness is all about until you talk about community and how wrongdoers and their victims can learn to be together in the body of Christ. Forgiveness raises the whole issue of what the Church is as a community of people who have been forgiven and are forgiving. If you don't address that, you really haven't gone the whole distance in developing a Christian perspective.

Sedlacek: I agree with that.

Gilbert: I think it partly depends on what you are forgiving. If you are forgiving someone for having a

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—BEV SEDLACEK



removing personal responsibility by claiming that we're all victims of our childhoods and therefore don't have the freedom to be what we choose to be, if you recognize that an awful lot of abusive people come from backgrounds that shape them to become what they are, and if you recognize that the even best of us can become the worst of us under certain circumstances—that sin is always a lurking reality in our hearts—then the harshness and the judgmentalism with which we approach people who hurt us can start to recede.

We do what John Wesley did when he saw a drunk in the street, and say, "There but for the grace of God, go I." That too, allows one to be free of the anger and the hatred, and this passion for retaliation and revenge that sometimes just overtakes us—and becomes the problem—we need to get rid of that, so we can get on with our lives.

Any other thoughts on this personal level of forgiveness, before we move on?

Rice: Just to touch on that. Jones's critique of therapeutic forgiveness is pretty strong. His concern is that if we view forgiveness primarily in those personal terms, there are larger Christian concerns that are going to be missed, such as the importance of reconciliation. Recently, I think, this issue was mentioned in the

different theological orientation than you and for disagreeing verbally in church, that's one kind of hurt to forgive. Certainly, then, you can talk about the importance of reconciliation and being part of the same group. But if you are talking, for example, about someone who is a serial killer and kills without rhyme or reason, I think that kind of act, to forgive to the extent to say, "Okay, this person is going to be part of our society," is dangerous, because . . .

Rice: There is no question about that. That raises the issue of what kind of community we are talking about, what kind of potential fellowship? Some of the most dramatic instances of forgiveness seem to involve parents who have lost children like this woman who John Webster talks about in South Africa, an Adventist woman whose daughter was killed. She established personal contact with the people who had done it. (See pages 23-25, below.)

I'm not sure that the model of forgiveness should be based on the victim of a violent crime. It wouldn't start with that, but with some other situation—learning how to be forbearing with other people, learning how to value them in spite of their faults, realizing that you need the same kind of generosity flowing in your direction. That is where we ought to start our theologi-

cal reflection about forgiveness, even though we go to these dramatic instances like the Nazi soldier who asked Simon Wiesenthal, the famous Jewish spokesperson, for forgiveness, and Pope John Paul II forgiving his would-be assassin. Jim, you know this question in ethical reflection: Do you go to the extreme to develop your principle, or do you try to find something that is more appropriate to where we live our daily lives?

Londis: Well, you hope that whatever you develop can handle the extreme.

Rice: That's true. I guess the question is: Is that where do you start? You want something that will cover these extremes and you want to be true to what emerges in those extremes, otherwise the fact that somebody managed to forgive somebody who did something terrible to them may not be particularly applicable to me. I would just have to say, "Well, that's just a wonderful gift of divine grace that somehow they have, and I don't think I'll ever get it, no matter what." It's a practice, a craft.

Londis: No single person has the resources to live the life of forgiveness that Christ lived. You need the Church. You need the body of believers surrounding you and encouraging you and praying for you and helping you put into practice the disciplines of Bible study, prayer, and reflection. That's one important distinction Jones makes between forgiveness in the context of the Church and forgiveness in therapy.

Rice: That's why Jones points out that forgiveness is a way of life.

Londis: Right, it's a habit, a virtue.

Rice: We must think of it as a specific act in order to deal with certain situations. But it really involves a whole way of life, a way of looking at oneself and others that takes a lifetime to pursue.

Londis: A victim may forgive a perpetrator, but the society may not. Even when a criminal has served the full sentence for a crime, when "justice" has been meted out to the full extent of the law, "forgiveness" may not occur. On the other hand, some legal authorities have the right to pardon anyone of any crime at their discretion, or "stay" the death penalty. Is this a kind of forgiveness, a legal forgiveness?

One thing that comes to mind is South Africa's attempt to implement a national policy of reconciliation and forgiveness. South Africa's effort assumes that if both black and white citizens will publicly confess before its Truth and Reconciliation Commission what horrible crimes they committed against each other during apartheid, no one will be indicted for the crimes to which they confess. They will be "forgiven." The belief

is that there is no way to get past the South African legacy of violence and revenge until the society goes through this process of forgiveness. (See pages 23-25, 30, below.)

This has never been tried before on a national level, on a social level as large as this. It's risky. Nelson Mandela supports it. It's basically the way he has lived his life ever since he was released from prison. And it's modeled, if you listen to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, on the Christian idea of forgiveness. But even the archbishop says he doesn't know if it is possible to implement. It's not the Church that is doing it, or in the context of the Christian community, it's in the context of this nation many of whom aren't Christians. So the social issue of forgiveness raises different questions perhaps.

Rice: I've probably talked too much, but a couple of things come to mind. In his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Reinhold Niebuhr distinguishes between the moral resources of the individual and the moral resources of the group. He says that justice is the highest virtue or moral value to which a group may aspire. Love—and he describes forgiveness as the final form of love—may be available to individuals, but it's really not available to groups. Groups don't have the same capacity for self-transcendence. On the other hand, Miroslav Volf points out, if justice is your only goal, all you will do is perpetuate injustice. But, if you aim beyond justice, if you aim for love and forgiveness, that's the way to achieve justice. This is the insight lying behind what is happening in South Africa.

Let's put it this way: I don't know if it is going to work. But we know the alternative can't work, because all it will do is perpetuate the cycle of violence. So there must be some way of trying to institutionalize, as odd as it sounds, a quality that everybody recognizes has a transcendent dimension to it.

Gilbert: I'd like to argue for a minute that justice doesn't exist in this world. If justice existed, we could get large numbers of people to agree wholeheartedly what was just in any given situation. That doesn't really happen. Most of the time, one group or another is saying "That wasn't just or that wasn't fair." And so even justice is kind of arbitrarily meted out. For the people in South Africa who were harmed, if this is the way the government chooses to handle the injustices that were done there, the people who were harmed on a personal level need to say, "I'm going to accept the decisions and go on from here, whether I personally agree it was just."

Rice: Yes, and evidently that is happening. Of course, the cases that make it to the news are the most

outstanding ones. A well-known case that involves people here in southern California is that of Amy Beal, who was twenty-six, working for social justice with the African National Congress in South Africa. She was murdered by black activists, who saw this white girl and murdered her. I found out not long ago that the driver of the car that she was in when this happened was an Adventist student at Helderberg College.

At any rate, her parents have been working in the same area where she was, raising money and developing educational, cultural, and economic programs for the people there to continue her work. The four men who were convicted of murdering her have been released from prison, and the parents say, "We accept this." There have been outstanding cases where people seem to have forgiven and done some very positive things in response

ago. Blacks and whites got together for a liturgy of forgiveness and reconciliation in a church service. One white faced one black and said something to the affect that, "I understand that what has happened to you historically caused your people great pain and continues to this day. I also understand that white people imposed this on you against your will. I want to express my remorse at what has happened and ask you to forgive me and my people for what we have done."

Apparently remarkable things happened. People were just "blown away" by that experience. Like you said, Bev, it's taking the larger social group and somehow finding a way to break it down into individual entities so that transaction can happen at a very personal level.

Rice: That last exchange was really helpful. One

I CAN FORGIVE SOMEONE FOR HURTING ME AND THAT PERSON MAY NEVER FEEL SORROW FOR WHAT THEY DID. BUT I AM STILL GOING TO BE BETTER OFF IF I FORGIVE. —LINDA GILBERT



to what they have suffered.

Sedlacek: I guess I see that forgiveness has to begin with individuals before it is plausible to transfer to a group. Being black in a predominantly white college in the early 1970s, I had a very difficult time. I grouped all white people together and when I got into relationships with individual students there, I couldn't do this blanket thing: "You're a white person and therefore I don't like you. Look at what you've done to my people." For me, it still has to happen on the individual level.

The other thing that I was thinking—when we talked earlier about reconciliation—is that reconciliation can take place in my heart, even though I don't necessarily go back into relationship with that person. For example, take the social perception that all white students who were my peers in college didn't understand black people; therefore, I could not like them. When I began to see and appreciate them individually, I could relate to them. There were some who were racists in their views and treatment of blacks. I could still relate to them individually and accept them even though they had difficulty accepting me. Still, in my heart, I can choose to accept and love them even though we may not have a meaningful interpersonal relationship. Reconciliation must first take place in the heart.

Londis: I saw something on television several years

of the things that we don't have in the Church regularly are ways of expressing forgiveness and calling people to account for their behavior as a part of that. In other words, we don't have rituals of judgment, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Baptism could be that, the Lord's Supper could be that, feet washing, and so on. I remember your account Kent, of a situation that happened to you at a communion service (see pages 5-6, above), but I don't think we develop practices of forgiveness, as Jones would call them, in a conscious intentional way, and what you said, Jim, indicates how potentially rich and rewarding that is. You'd think that the Church, a community devoted to forgiveness, would want to study the importance of having rituals like that.

Sedlacek: That's what I think happened at the recent race summit sponsored by the General Conference. From the report of several people who were there it was a very moving experience because it was applied personally. It wasn't just a generic or group application, it was people coming together in a meaningful, personal experience, some to talk about what happened to them and others to apologize for what happened, even for the fact that the Church has not apologized for all these years. (See page 31, below). I know that for a lot of African Americans who were there it was a personal taking on by some of the white leaders of what hap-

pened and a personal apology, not just social one. I think that is very, very significant.

Hansen: I think that confession—what Bev was talking about at the race summit—is the key. I used to think, “well . . . the group confession is after the fact, it’s generalized, it doesn’t mean much.” I don’t believe that anymore. I don’t think it’s possible to move forward in a social action, in a corporate body kind of way, until that confession is made.

There is a kind of worn out argument that, “hey, that wasn’t me. I have nothing to answer on this.” But I am the beneficiary of somebody who said, “this is me and I can do this and I am going to do this to these people,” and so on down the line. So to keep saying, “it’s not me, I don’t have anything to apologize for,” just stagnates this thing and holds it to perpetuity. It’s impossible to move. If you are on the other side of that, you are always thinking, “you know they never even get it, they don’t see it, they don’t say they are sorry, and these other things that are going on are just symptomatic of the fact that there is no acknowledgment that I’m even a person in some ways.”

It doesn’t always get that stark, but that is really what it is going on. So I think confession is really the key. What they have done in South Africa emphasizes that. You can’t move without that.

I know that there are people who say that confession is meaningless, but that’s not true.

Rice: Can I just toss in a thought? As a lifelong Protestant, I’ve never really cultivated an appreciation for the confessional. More recently, I’ve come to see that there may be a value in it, for two reasons. One is that it does what Kent said needs to be done. You must in the presence of another person confront the wrong things about your life: the things you’ve done, and the things you’ve left undone. The other side, as a Benedictine Father once explained: “Even though God forgives, it’s helpful for us to hear the words ‘you are forgiven’ from another human being.” Perhaps therapists perform this kind of function in their own way outside the Church.

Sedlacek: I personally believe it is a function of the Church. We are God’s voice. When abused women hear (and I’m often cast in that role): “it’s not your fault! it’s not your fault!” or, “your sins are forgiven,” I’d like not to leave it just to counselors. That is something we can do as a body of believers as well.

Londis: Well, there is a great deal of power in two things that happen to the Church member who is disfellowshipped or senses the reproach of the Church. First is to hear from a Church authority, “You are forgiven!” Second is to hear from the body of believers

that we want you back into our fellowship. Theologically, when the gospel says, “Whosoever sins you forgive, they shall be forgiven,” it is telling the Church to boldly accept that authority and proclaim God’s forgiveness in Christ’s name.

Sedlacek: Right

Londis: We must also live as a community of faith that models forgiveness within our fellowship.

Rice: I couldn’t agree with you more. That is a major concern of Jones, and one of the things that most excited me about his discussion, because forgiveness in the New Testament is about building the community. And it really addresses the question of the inclusiveness of the community. That was the big question in the Early Church—who gets to belong here?

As you have pointed out Jim, that cuts in a lot of different directions. Can Gentiles as well as Jews be part of this community? The answer was yes. Then the question is: Can sinners or wrongdoers and their victims be part of the same community? Again, the answer of the New Testament is yes. Forgiveness is a way of establishing that even that boundary is transcended by what Christ has brought into the world. Even wrongdoers can be part of the body that includes the people they have wronged. Jesus’ own example generates that expectation. Theologically, forgiveness answers the question of who belongs to the Church.

Hansen: That’s right. In II Corinthians, Paul talked about the man who was disfellowshipped in I Corinthians. And Paul said, “You know we need to forgive as a community. If you forgive him, I forgive him. I don’t want you to think you need to be waiting for what I do. I’m with you in this. Let’s not prolong this exclusion, lest we give Satan the advantage.” In context, I think Paul’s saying, “There’s a line crossed here that becomes destructive, I believe, not only to that individual, but also to us.”

Londis: Yes, Richard Hays from Duke makes the point that in the New Testament, when a church member was disciplined or excluded from the body of believers, immediately the whole evangelistic arsenal of the Church got unleashed on that person. He or she was then one of the “lost sheep” for whom we leave the ninety-nine. The Church, if anything, redoubled its efforts to win that person back. It is clear that the exclusion was meant to be temporary and, hopefully, short-lived. So even though the person had been disciplined, the person never really felt quite separated. And that’s the point I think you were making, Kent.

Hansen: Yes, exactly. And in Matthew 18, when Jesus says to let one be as a tax collector, I have always

put that in the context of how Jesus felt about tax collectors generally, which was with empathy and wanting to win them back. I've always just seen it as circular. If this doesn't work out then we go back to ground zero and start over again. I have never seen that as a write-off. I've just seen it as, okay, we start back here.

Rice: I think both are important, because there is a process here each element of which needs to be respected. One part of the healing is for a community to express its sorrow and pain and disgust, maybe, of the actions of certain people. I know of a church where there was a messy divorce, and many people were unhappy because they felt that there was not sufficient disapproval or distancing of the church from that behavior. Maybe if there had been a little more of that at the right time, the people could have been reincorporated within the group without the kind of fallout that it generated. People looked at what happened and said,

There is no move that the Church makes to do anything for them, to reincorporate them within the body, to restore them to ministry. They've lost everything. It's ironic that a community devoted to forgiveness and reconciliation hasn't worked out more ways of providing that for people.

Londis: I suppose one interesting issue for the Church to address is how we accomplish this with people we feel have betrayed us theologically. In Adventism, correct doctrine for a long time was more important than anything else. If people wander behaviorally, but agree theologically with us, there's hope for them. If they wander theologically but not behaviorally, there is no hope for them. What does it mean for us to have fellowship and to be reconciled with those people?

Gilbert: Well, the inability to forgive goes back to that kind of dogmatic stance, "I'm right, and I'm more right than you are for some reason." If it's a disagreement over theological issues, it's "I'm right, because I

YOU NEED THE BODY OF BELIEVERS SURROUNDING YOU AND ENCOURAGING YOU AND PRAYING FOR YOU AND HELPING YOU PUT INTO PRACTICE THE DISCIPLINES OF BIBLE STUDY AND PRAYER AND REFLECTION. —JAMES LONDIS



"It doesn't look like the church stands for anything. People have been hurt, and their pain isn't acknowledged by the church." So in order to bring people who have done really painful things into the community, some acknowledgement of that pain has to take place.

Hansen: Rick, we may even be thinking of the same situation, and it never seemed to heal. I would say observing it and even being part of that body at the time that forgiveness was not treated as an ethical, accountable process, it was treated as, "we don't really want to deal with this, so we'll label this as forgiveness and move on." Well, calling it "forgiveness" doesn't make it forgiveness.

Rice: Exactly, that's right.

Hansen: That's a vastly different thing.

Rice: If we just say, "God forgives and let's not get into it," that isn't forgiveness. If lives have been damaged, that has to be dealt with. The Church needs to make some kind of statement. I agree, we don't move toward reconciliation like we should. I'm reminded of people I know who have left the Adventist ministry and find that they're cut off, they're out.

believe correctly. And you're wrong, because you believe incorrectly." I think forgiveness has an element of humility in it to say, "You know, I'm human, I don't know absolutely everything. You're human, you don't know everything. So maybe we need to find a way to get along even though we see the world—see God even—in two different ways."

Rice: This raises a difficult issue of whether we ought to regard theological diversity as a sin. It really seems significant to me that we broaden and enrich the notion of what it means to belong to community and recognize that people wrestle with what it means to be a Christian on a variety of different levels. Some wrestle with questions about how to behave in a certain way, and others wrestle with how to think a certain way. When you raise the question, "How do you forgive people who wander theologically?" I think it raises the whole question of what kind of community the Church is. Maybe this is one of the crucial points that this whole issue raises.

Londis: Theologically, I'm of the opinion at this point that whatever is being said doctrinally has to

really threaten the very existence of the Church to warrant the strong reaction of exclusion or disfellowshipping.

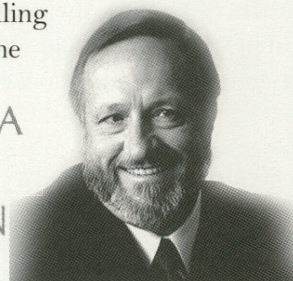
Rice: I agree.

Londis: Anything short of that, the Church needs to be tolerant and let the theological process work itself out over time as people think about it, pray about it, study it, and work it through. Otherwise, we get ourselves into all kinds of difficulties.

Hansen: Well, this last discussion is fascinating. I've thought a lot about the issue of theological diversity because, while the Adventist Church is not a creedal body, we often have conflicts that fall into the model of historic schisms and we simply call it something else. For me, it boils down to two things: First, forgiveness—is it appropriate to even talk about it in this context? Is somebody really wronged by theological diversity?

Londis: Good point.

I DON'T THINK ITS POSSIBLE TO MOVE FORWARD IN A SOCIAL ACTION, IN A CORPORATE BODY KIND OF WAY UNTIL . . . CONFESSION IS MADE. —KENT HANSEN



Hansen: And the second thing is, does someone have to agree with me on the specific issue, on the specific incident? Do we need complete agreement to have forgiveness? If so, then I think we always have a power dynamic going on that probably is not biblical forgiveness.

Londis: One more thing on theological diversity occurred to me. It comes from one of the most interesting books that I have read in the last five or ten years. It is called *Culture Wars*. The thesis of the book is that what used to segregate people was much more ideological. Adventists, Catholics, Baptists, and Greek Orthodox used to have more differences than similarities. But what's happened in the last several decades, the author argues, is that the fundamentalist in Catholicism has more in common with the fundamentalist in Adventism, and the liberal in Catholicism has more in common with the liberal in Adventism, than a liberal in Catholicism has in common with a fundamentalist in Adventism. You get my point. And that has absolutely been an earthquake.

The author talks about this as a cultural war, and not just a kind of theological doctrinal war. When I talk to liberal Catholics who are willing to challenge the authority of the

pope—they don't think he speaks *ex cathedra* or infallibly—who don't believe everything that the Catholic Church says about birth control, who believe Scripture deserves a great deal more importance than its gotten in the history of the Church, I say to myself, "these people are speaking my language, even though they are Catholic."

And its kind of interesting that, in the evangelical world, the thing that is uniting evangelicals and Catholics is the pro-life movement. They really do speak the same language. That, I think, is a new phenomenon in religion, and I'm not sure we have figured out how to address it or deal with it.

Rice: In response to that, I remember hearing Hans Kung recount a conversation that he had with Karl Barth. It turned out that they had some strong theological similarities on various issues. And Kung said to Barth, "You know, we're not that far apart. There's not that much between us." And Barth said, "No, there's not a lot between us, but behind us."

Londis: Well, what does forgiveness mean with no interaction?

Rice: That's true, and if forgiveness is a way of life it implies an openness to the other that refuses to insist that the other is forever beyond the reach of your own fellowship.

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