

**THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS UPON
THE PRACTICE OF FAITH**

**EXTENDED ESSAYS
IN
APPLIED THEOLOGY**

MARIUS DANIEL MARIȘ

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1

The triune God and the dynamic of forgiveness in the body of Christ

Introduction

Most people would agree that the issue of forgiveness is a very difficult one. As Bishop B. F. Westcott expressed it “nothing superficially seems simpler than forgiveness, whereas nothing if we look deeply is more mysterious or more difficult.”¹

It is a mysterious experience because as Mary Ann Coate puts it: “Forgiveness has its origin in the religious dimension”². No doubt for someone who does not share a religious framework for life, the experience of forgiveness does not have the religious dimension and in consequence he may regard the experience superficially. Other people think that such an experience is exclusively the business of the Church and church ministers. As someone said in a radio program: “The

¹ B. F. Westcott, *Historic Faith*, p.130 quoted by John Stott in *The Cross of Christ* (IVP, London 1986, p. 110).

² Mary Ann Coate *Sin, Guilt and Forgiveness* (SPCK, London 1989, p. xii).

job of the Church is to make people feel guilty”. As far as I am concerned I think such a statement is rather a simplistic one and reveals the confusion about this subject. Nevertheless, to use one of the interesting observations of Mary Ann Coate, forgiveness has “ordinary human currency in our time”.³ Certainly we can find in the media almost weekly topics dealing with the experience of forgiveness. Titles like: “How can I forgive my husband’s infidelity”⁴ would be representative of, such ordinary human experience. Under this title, three different letters were published to stress the difficulty of forgiveness even in such common experiences. Each person described in dramatic words the experience through which they had gone. For example, one wrote that she was devastated after her husband admitted that for a year he had been having an affair. They described the emotions they went through like: anger, hurt, disbelief. The conclusion of one letter was that the offended person was “bound to go through a grieving process which lasted at least a year.”’

³ *Ibid.*, p. xiii

⁴ *How can I forgive my husband infidelity*, (Daily Mail, Thursday January 30, 1997, p. 7).

...My husband wants me to forgive and forget and because I love him so I want to. However, I feel tormented by his deceit...⁵

These examples make us ask questions like: Why is it so difficult to forgive? What is really involved in the very common act of forgiveness? Where is the source for our forgiveness? Is it possible to “extrapolate from our human experience of forgiveness some understanding of the forgiveness of God?”⁶

How easy would it be for a minister who has deceived his wife, to receive forgiveness from his Church? How does forgiveness work in this case?

This essay is an attempt to explore the dynamic of forgiveness in our human relationships and how a Christian understanding of the image of God could help us in giving and receiving forgiveness. There is also a deeper pastoral dimension.

There are many examples of pastors who were themselves in difficult life situations when they have failed and

⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶ Mary Ann Coate, p. xiii.

were in desperate need of forgiveness. Who will offer absolution for them, as an assurance of God's forgiveness?

Unfortunately the history of such experiences tells us that forgiveness in these circumstances is particularly difficult. The failure of a pastor has tremendous consequences not just for his family but also for the church, the larger family of Christians. For this reason I agree with James Emerson who says that we as pastors have to help our churches to discover the reality of the dynamic of forgiveness. Otherwise the church will be irrelevant for the crisis of this age.⁷ The same challenge comes from David Atkinson who writes: "The task of the Christian community is to enable us to learn how to forgive and accept forgiveness"⁸. To help us explore the nature of forgiveness in the body of Christ I propose to consider first: the nature of forgiveness.

1. The nature of forgiveness

What does forgiveness mean in our personal experience?

James Emerson in his approach to the human experience of forgiveness says that things like language, terms and

⁷ James Emerson, *The dynamics of forgiveness* (George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London 1965, p. 26).

⁸ David Atkinson, *Pastoral Ethics* (Lynx, communication, Oxford 1994).

meanings change, but human experience is the same⁹. Engaging with the same question, Mary Ann Coate points out that “forgiveness at human level seems to be born of personal need; a need to feel better inside, to become free of inner forces which threaten to poison us”¹⁰. The problem with her assumption, as she herself writes, is that not all human beings appear to have this need or sometimes “it takes a long time for it to surface”.¹¹

Therefore we have to accept the case that we cannot be forgiven if the person does not want to forgive us. Nonetheless, we should accept that there is still the possibility for us to forgive someone else, even if that person does not acknowledge it. But, in this situation, there are strong arguments to affirm that the process of forgiveness is incomplete. Since the aim of forgiveness is reconciliation there has to be a specific act of forgiveness from both sides. As Mary Ann Coate put it: “both parties must feel the need for forgiveness and want it”.¹²

⁹ James Emerson, p. 27.

¹⁰ Mary Ann Coate, p. 75.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

It is worth noting at this point a metaphor borrowed by Paul Fiddes from Mackintosh which develops the whole doctrine of Atonement in a modern way of thinking. Dr. Fiddes uses the metaphor of “the journey of forgiveness” to illustrate the cross as a creative act in the image of atonement. He affirms that: “this act is a past event with power to change human attitudes to God and to each other in the present; this creativity is at the very heart of forgiveness, as can be seen if we reflect upon what it involves in human relationships”.¹³

This metaphor offers a new perspective on the human experience of forgiveness. Certainly in this new picture forgiveness appears to be not just a simple state or feeling but a complex process. Through this process the forgiver is enabled to enter by “passionate imagination and self projection into the other’s conflict, to hold by intercession his faltering hand, to weep with his sorrow, actually to think about himself still at the other’s side in the misery and loneliness of guilt”,¹⁴

¹³ Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation, The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Darton Longman and Todd, London 1989, p. 172-173)

¹⁴ H. R Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of forgiveness* (Nisbet & co. Ltd., London 1927, p. 188).

As we noticed before, reconciliation is impossible unless both parties risk themselves in the “voyage of anguish”.¹⁵ Once engaged in this movement each part becomes vulnerable and exposes itself to change. The offender has to take the “voyage of sorrow and repentance towards the person he has hurt”.¹⁶ On the other hand the forgiver himself also needs to embark on a “voyage of empathy”. In this case the voyage is perhaps more difficult. This could be “an experience of the sacrificial pain of vicarious suffering”¹⁷ for the forgiver.

None the less, as Mackintosh, quoting Denney, has written: “there is no such experience in the relations of human beings as a real forgiveness which is painless, cheap or easy. There is always passion of penitence on the one side and the more profound passion of love on the other...”¹⁸

Life experience reveals to us that when human relations are broken between partners in families or between friends, the one who is suffering the most is often the forgiver. He or she

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹⁶ Paul S. Fiddes, p. 172.

¹⁷ H. R. Mackintosh, p. 188.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

must live with the injury and the shame throughout the years. However, as we all know very well, human beings are imperfect therefore even the forgiver needs to be forgiven. The one who takes the initiative of reconciliation has to be prepared to pay the cost because there are a lot of “blockages” in restoring a broken relationship.

I agree with Mackintosh when he says that in every great act of forgiveness a great agony is enshrined .¹⁹ Certainly the power of forgiveness is to be found in the agony of suffering. In other respects forgiveness is not merely a requirement for the individual with regard to himself, but also a requirement for the individual in relation to others. It follows that forgiveness is necessary both for the forgiver and for the offender, since that is the only way that true reconciliation take place.

Explaining the dynamic of the journey of forgiveness, Paul Fiddes points out two important phases in this movement. He identifies the first stage as an active stage for both parties, the forgiver as well as the offender. At this stage the journey has a sense of adventure because both parties are engaged in what he calls “a voyage of discovery”. He suggests the complexity of this stage by the fact that the forgiver has to go

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

to the “point of identification with the feelings of the offender”²⁰. The scene here reveals the dynamic entry by passionate imagination and self projection of the forgiver into the offender’s internal conflict. On the other hand the offender must himself engage in a movement of discovery. I would like to suggest that this represents the encounter of the offender with a live memory. Indeed confronting the past through memory is inevitable at this stage. As most people dealing with forgiveness agree, such confrontation can be the first step towards forgiveness. Nevertheless, they will also agree that confrontation is not possible too soon. As an example we could think here about abused people. The offender in this case can be described as a torturer and the forgiver as the victim. In such cases, only the survivor can tell if he or she is prepared for this confrontation. As far as the abuser is concerned he has to face his actions and to take responsibility for them. He cannot expect “easy” forgiveness.

However, in such cases forgiveness is often seen as an essential part of the *healing process*. Hillary Cashman points out this idea: ”Forgiveness is often seen as a part of the healing process: healing of the abused person, in that it is supposed to

²⁰ Paul S. Fiddes, *The Doctrine of God in Pastoral Theology* (MTh. In Applied Theology course, Michaelmas term, 1996, lecture 5).

help to free him from the past; and of the abuser, since it is supposed to help him to repent and change his ways.”²¹ At this stage there is an important role for the memory . We can sympathize with some feminist theologians when they stress the importance of memory in reconciliation, thinking specially of the victim role of women in society throughout history. The memory of suffering and oppression of all people, makes some people say that forgiveness must be rooted in such reality.

This common view of human forgiveness encapsulated in the universal expression “forgive and forget”, reveals a superficial understanding of forgiveness. To adopt the position of someone who pretends that forgiveness means forgetting could be dangerous to our psychological and spiritual health. Helmuth Thielicke, a German pastor who endured suffering under the Nazi regime has said: “One should never mention the words forgive and forget in the same breath. No, we will remember but in forgiving we no longer use the memory against others”.²²

²¹ Hillary Cashman, *Christianity and child sexual abuse* (SPCK, London, 1993, p. 79).

²² Richard Foster, *Prayer* (Hodden and Stoughton, Ltd. ,London, 1992, p. 198).

There are no dead memories to hide them. We have to deal with them in this “voyage of discovery”.

Another way of escaping memories is pretending that the offence did not really matter. In this circumstance, the person tries to push away the offence and hope for an inner peace and resignation.²³ Instead of forgiveness the person finds isolation. Mary Ann Coate used an example of isolation to stress the necessity to face the strong and active feelings within us. She uses the example of the gay man, member in a Christian Church.

For him there is only the way of withdrawal and isolation. In part this is because of the fear of being ostracised should he be found out. In part too, it is perhaps he can not face his strong and active feelings, they remain repressed, pushed down out of sight and out of consciousness he can only feel shame, fear, and loneliness.²⁴

As Paul Fiddes writes, we have to come to that point in our experience of forgiveness, where we can recognise that our

²³ Mary Ann Coate, p. 80.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

good and bad feelings co-exist, in order to take responsibility for the damage we do to others through our feelings. “We begin to have a concern for the other and an ability to see the situation from the other’s point of view...”.²⁵ At this point we reach that level of maturity which helps us to see the power of love is greater than the power of the offence.

In the second stage of forgiveness the forgiver experiences “the journey of endurance”. At this stage the forgiver makes himself vulnerable because he is open to the hostility of the offender. When the forgiver takes the voyage of endurance opening to the hostility of the offender, identifying himself with the feelings of the offender, offering forgiveness, the law of retribution is broken. As someone put it :

We are able to forgive in such a way because of the supreme act of forgiveness at Golgotha, which once for all broke the back of the cycle of retaliation.²⁶

Through the costly process of forgiveness the offender is released by the forgiver and is free to receive God’s Grace whereby the offence no longer separates. We now come to the

²⁵ Paul S. Fiddes, *The Doctrine of God in Pastoral Theology*.

²⁶ Foster, p. 199.

second important question in this essay. *How can engagement with God create human forgiveness?*

2. The Triune God, the source of forgiveness

In order to begin to answer this question, I suggest we review some of the approaches what have been made. First Mackintosh, who appears to be very sure that “forgiveness has its ground and spring in God not in man”.²⁷ Secondly Paul Fiddes, suggests that: “the experience of forgiveness in human relationships helps to interpret God’s great offer of forgiveness to human beings, creating a new situation universally”.²⁸

I think these two affirmations, help us to understand the relation between human forgiveness and divine forgiveness. The importance of Mackintosh’s statement is the stress on the truth that God, the originator of all things, is the source of human forgiveness.

The value of Dr Fiddes’ affirmation is in the “extrapolation” of human experience of forgiveness to God’s experience of forgiveness, which helps us to have a better understanding of the triune God who engages Himself in

²⁷ Mackintosh, p. 336.

²⁸ Fiddes, *The doctrine of God in pastoral Theology*.

forgiving human beings. I would like to develop these two ideas further but we should note that some have reservations about such a process.

John Stott, is rather suspicious about such a possibility. He says:

The fact is that the analogy between our forgiveness and God's is far from being exact... For us to argue: we forgive each other unconditionally, let God do the same to us betrays not sophistication but shallowness, since it overlooks the elementary fact that we are not God.²⁹

I think Stott could be suspected of a kind of superficiality here. His argument seems to be very simplistic. He says furthermore that we are private individuals and other people's misdemeanours are personal injuries. So he argues:

God is not a private individual, however, nor is sin just a personal injury. On the contrary, God is himself the maker of the laws we break and sin is rebellion against Him.³⁰

²⁹ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (IVP, London, 1986, p. 88).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

The problem is that God appears in this picture, as well as in the whole classical theology as an isolated being and insensitive to our sufferings. Therefore forgiveness, as Stott describes it, is not a journey of empathy with our sufferings but rather a legal pardon, in which the justice of God is somehow satisfied in the death of Christ. That makes him understand forgiveness as “constituted by the inevitable collision between divine perfection and human rebellion, between God as He is and us as we are.”³¹

Consequently Stott is concerned to answer the traditional dilemma: How can God express his holy love in forgiving sinners without compromising his holiness, and his holiness in judging sinners without frustrating his love?³² The answer given by him is the cross of Christ, where divine mercy and justice “were equally expressed and eternally reconciled. God’s holy love was satisfied.”

I suppose that for all Christians the cross is God’s universal answer to our human problems. But the explanation given by the classical view of atonement does not satisfy all Christians. Mackintosh, for example, points out very well the confusion in the legal understanding of forgiveness.(see

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 88.

Mackintosh p. 23). He suggests that the old misconception of forgiveness divided the nature of God against itself, by deriving forgiveness from love and the punitive consequences of sin from righteousness.³³ His strong argument in sustaining this idea is based upon the essence of love. He says: “Love that is worthy to be called love confronts the evil thing with an inevitable and intrinsic purity”. Moreover, as we encounter or practice it in our human affairs, forgiveness is an active process in the mind and temper of the forgiver by means of which he abolished a moral hindrance to fellowship with the wrong doer, and re-established the freedom and happiness of friendship.³⁴ If forgiveness is to God the “profoundest of problems” as Stott expressed it, then forgiveness has to be “emphatically more than ignoring a trespass” as Mackintosh argues.

In his paper to the B.C.C., Dr. Fiddes makes an important remark regarding the role of the cross in the salvation of God. He asks if the cross is a particular saving act of God, or simply the window upon a continual journey of love. He suggests in his answer that if we think of forgiveness as a healing journey into the experience of an offender, then it becomes clear that God has always been entering into human experience of death

³³ Mackintosh, p. 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

and alienation; He could not have done it for the first time at the cross.³⁵ This picture of God is very different from that of a Monarch who can be satisfied in some way and then is willing to offer legal pardon.

As we have seen already, forgiveness is more than legal pardon. Through the process of forgiveness the offender is won back into the circle of relationship. John V. Taylor, exploring the way in which God manifested his forgiveness throughout the history of the Old Testament, finds that there is always a place in Yahveh's thought for a "perhaps".

The forgiveness of God is never in question ;all that is uncertain is the human repentance, the return, which will open the door to that forgiveness and let reconciliation take effect.³⁶

In contrast with the traditional view of atonement, the modern view makes possible the extrapolation from human forgiveness to the divine experience of forgiveness. As Carr has said:

³⁵ Paul S. Fiddes, *The Atonement and Trinity* (The forgotten Trinity - a selection of papers presented to the BCC study commission on Trinitarian doctrine today, BCC/CCBI, London, 1991, p. 118).

³⁶ John V. Taylor, *The Christlike God* (SCM, London, 1992, p. 164).

Traditional doctrines of atonement are a source of deep dissatisfaction to almost all sensitive Christians. Their transactional character, whether expressed in terms of propitiation, substitution, or payment of a debt, make them an easy target of criticism. Yet the cross of Christ remains a powerful source of the experience of forgiveness and renewal³⁷

As we noticed above, one of the suggestions regarding the cross of Christ was to see it as a “window” which opens to us the inside of God’s being. If Paul Fiddes is right when he affirms that God has always been “voyaging” into his world, to share in human life, and I am sympathetic to this idea, then the cross is the event through which God is taking the longest journey into our human experience. It is in the cross, he says, where we can see clearly the “twofold journey of discovery and the endurance made by the triune God”³⁸.

Another helpful suggestion by Dr. Fiddes, is the idea that the cross could be understood as an “event” in God’s relational

³⁷ Wesley Carr, p. 114 (wiles 1982, 66).

³⁸ Paul S. Fiddes, *The doctrine of God in pastoral theology*.

life.³⁹ This idea points out that God as the source of forgiveness has to be understood as the triune God, relating to our human experience of forgiveness. In this case, the cross is understood: “as making visible the triune relationships within God, disclosing a pain of separation and forsakenness to which God continually opens himself within his very being for the sake of the world”⁴⁰ Therefore we who are estranged can take our place by faith, within the divine fellowship, because, as Fiddes says, God is making room for us at the great cost of love.⁴¹ And there is something else to consider here. It is Jesus, God the Son, who is enabled through the Holy Spirit, to take the journey of forgiveness which “originated” in the heart of God the Father. The journey of forgiveness has the power “that flows from participation”.⁴² Certainly, throughout Christian history, Jesus’ death on the cross was at the centre of the divine forgiveness. Jesus identified himself with those who were offenders of God and far from any possibility of reconciliation. He placed himself beside those who were guilty. As Mackintosh put it:

³⁹ Paul S. Fiddes, *The Atonement and trinity*, p. 107.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁴² Paul S. Fiddes, *The Doctrine of God in pastoral theology*.

If we picture Jesus face to face with one of his penitents who encountered Him, we may ask ourselves what it was in Him that conveyed to them the sense and reality of pardon. What created their assurance? Manifestly not the simple fact that He admitted them to his presence or that He looked at them as a spectator to their misery. Rather it was that in the spirit He went down, to where they were in their bitter, grief-stricken distance from God; and thus joining them inwardly He took hold up their hand, that He might raise them up."⁴³

At this point human engagement with God creates forgiveness.

3. Divine forgiveness, a model for human forgiveness

Paul Tournier, in one of his books where he speaks about guilt and grace, noticed that:

“There are people who make distinction between God’s love and his forgiveness, as though He always loved us

⁴³ H. R. Mackintosh, p. 213.

and without any conditions, but he had laid down certain conditions for forgiveness”⁴⁴

He argues the opposite by affirming that a God who does not forgive, can no longer be regarded as a God who loves unconditionally.⁴⁵ In the same way Mackintosh also raises a key question: ”Does true love wait on repentance ,and especially love like that of God in Christ?”⁴⁶

Certainly nowhere in the New Testament could we find that before loving an offender we should wait and see whether he is penitent. As we mentioned earlier, Jesus Christ welcomed sinners in his company and demonstrated that he does not change them in order to love them, but he loves them and change was a result of his creative love. This will lead us inevitably to think of the divine act of forgiveness as a creative act in it’s character. Consequently this means that such an act will produce a new situation. At this point we are challenged to think what kind of change it will be and how this change will affect our relationship with Him.

⁴⁴ Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1962, p.192).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁴⁶ Mackintosh, p. 237.

Modern theologians have revolutionized the whole concept of the creative love of God. If God suffers then He also changes. But this change in God seems to demonstrate that only a suffering God can be powerful. By his argument Paul Fiddes is challenging us “to abandon worldly ideas of power - the power to make other people do what we want... Divine power, he says, is the ability to transform hearts, to recreate human society-and that power comes through taking the journey of forgiveness, the way of humble identification.”⁴⁷ If this is the image of the All-powerful God perhaps we will understand more easily what kind of forgiveness comes from an All-powerful God?

Forgiveness in this case comes from a God whose Love is more powerful than our offence. “In Christ’s sufferings the Father’s mercy is held forth in an act which persuades men to be done with sin.”⁴⁸ As a result this kind of forgiveness is a gift. Therefore God in his All-powerful love is offering this gift to all human beings with real passion.

Finally I would like to concentrate at the last major question: Can we talk about the dynamic of forgiveness only in the Christian Church?

⁴⁷ Paul S. Fiddes, *The Doctrine of God in Pastoral theology*.

⁴⁸ Mackintosh, p. 119.

I begin to answer this question by quoting an important affirmation about the importance of the mediation of forgiveness:

When we speak the words *you are forgiven, go in peace*, we are making incarnate in our own flesh and blood the forgiving offer of God. We are daring to act for God. It is as if God knows that people need to hear the word of acceptance spoken in an audible voice as well as silently in their hearts; they need acceptance embodied in a person whom they can grasp with their senses⁴⁹

Because most of these affirmations of forgiveness are spoken in the church we can agree with James Emerson who says that the contextual nature of the church is that of forgiveness. Pastoral care is mediation of that forgiveness which makes it possible to receive the word and to repent.⁵⁰ Therefore we can reflect further upon: *The church as the context of realized forgiveness.*

⁴⁹ Paul S. Fiddes, *The Doctrine of God in pastoral theology*.

⁵⁰ James Emerson, p. 23.

I first came across the expression: “realized forgiveness” when I read Emerson’s book about forgiveness. His purpose in this book is to show the essential place of forgiveness in theological thought, as well as to show the importance of forgiveness in making the church relevant.

He defines “realized” forgiveness as the awareness of forgiveness to such a degree that a person is free from the guilt he feels. In the Christian context the main characteristic of realized forgiveness is “the freedom to be a new creature and to be creative.”⁵¹ When he analyses the biblical texts about forgiveness he notices that the significance of the Hebrew word for forgiveness is “the removal of the effect of the past upon the present.”⁵²

Hence forgiveness is spoken as the “Divine restoration of the offender into favor”; However his conclusion is that Christ is needed because in no other way is a sufficient mediation of the context of forgiveness made. He is needed especially because the cross as an instrument of God allows man to see that context. It is worth noting also the two dimensions of forgiveness he is speaking about. The “contextual” dimension

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

of forgiveness is the church, and the “instrumental” dimension of forgiveness is penance.

If we agree with Emerson when he says that forgiveness is a context in which we live, then this context is mediated by a person or a group. The context gives freedom to someone to see himself as he is, it gives him freedom for honest introspection. On the other hand, the instrumentation pole of forgiveness is important too, because it does two things: through confession of sins, the instrument expresses things as they are. But secondly it expresses things as they have become. In other words in the context freedom is there but not expressed. Instrumentation allows their freedom to be expressed. When private penance took the place of public penance, the penitent was freed from the humiliation of public rebuke.⁵³

To return to one of the examples at the beginning of this paper, we may now ask: *how does the church deal with the problem of total pastoral breakdown?* In the light of this theological discussion we want to address this issue.

There are cases when the congregation no longer has confidence in the pastor’s ministry and from the church point

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

of view the situation is irredeemable. But using Dr. Fiddes' words, we could address this question: "How does the church incarnate the forgiveness of God in flesh and blood to these people and to assure them they are forgiven."⁵⁴

Remembering that forgiveness aims at reconciliation which requires the offender to be restored into relationship, should a church accept its pastor back in ministry if he has confessed his sin in sorrow and repentance? Learning from some experiences from the past, the reality is that it is difficult to see a pastor back in ministry in the same church in which he failed. However there are some exceptions. In those cases perhaps each member of the church did participate creatively in the process of restoring the life of the minister.

The image of the Triune God working in the world, through persuasion not coercion, is helpful for each member of the body of Christ to share the journey of forgiveness together with God in the life of the minister who needs forgiveness.

Where the whole church is ready to forgive him, the minister is freed to act as a honest broker in the relationship seeking reconciliation. However we have to agree with the point made by Penny Jamieson:

⁵⁴ Paul S. Fiddes, *The doctrine of God in pastoral theology*.

It is not uncommon for people facing up the reality that their priest has sinned grievously to move very rapidly into forgiveness mode, and then be ready to continue as if nothing happened. But the sin has happened, a very great deal of suffering has been inflicted and it cannot be eradicated by cheap grace ⁵⁵

Forgiveness becomes denial and therefore as she noticed the silent victim of such strategy is the pastor's own conscience. I agree with her observation that what could have been an opportunity for personal growth leads instead to a further decay of conscience which can make further abusive relationship. But, as she points out this kind of forgiveness also further victimizes the women concerned. Such an experience makes her lose her faith community, because she no longer feels safe there. But finally such actions deepen the damage done to the Christian community, for the abuse of a particular woman becomes an abuse of the whole community when it ties them into patterns of deceit and secrecy. ⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Penny Jamieson, *Living at the Edge - Sacramental and Solidarity in leadership*, (Mowbray, London, 1997, p. 119).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

But there is something else to add. This kind of forgiveness also diminish our understanding of what God can do for us. As Penny Jamieson express it “Divine forgiveness can reach deeper into the soul of the abuser, for nothing can be concealed from the gaze of divine love.”⁵⁷ But, to use Jamieson’s words again: “God can forgive the enormity of our sin we do not need to trivialize or resort to reductionism.”⁵⁸ What the church and the pastor has to learn from such experience is that the sin can be faced in all its gravity, and it can be forgiven, without denial at the depth of truth. As someone put it: “Real love is never based on protecting people from their own truths, because if we do that we hold them in their own deaths instead of enabling real growth towards spiritual maturity”⁵⁹

But the question in the end is: How much has the minister himself learned about God and about forgiveness from such an experience? First of all that the forgiveness that God offers when confession derives from real self-knowledge is properly regarded as healing. Secondly that healing is the restoration of balance in that sense that it will enable him to receive

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

forgiveness and to begin a new phase of his spiritual journey, teaching the people about real forgiveness and sharing with them the painful journey of forgiveness.

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