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Forgiveness

Introduction

- 1) What is forgiveness? The following are true experiences of others:
 - a) 'I lit a candle for him this morning. I have forgiven him already' – the words of a nun who was attacked and robbed by a man in a convent raid in west Belfast in October 2013.
 - b) 'I don't know the man or the circumstances, but from my heart I forgive him' – the words of retired chief constable Robin Oake when responding to a journalist's question, "Mr Oake, what do you think about the man who killed your son?" [Mr Oake's policeman son, Stephen, was stabbed to death while on duty in Manchester on 14 January 2003.]
 - c) 'She was a great wee lassie. She was a pet, and she's dead. But I bear no ill-will, I bear no grudge' – the words of Gordon Wilson who lost his daughter Marie in the 1987 Enniskillen Cenotaph explosion. Regarding her killers, he subsequently confirmed, "I did not forgive them, their crime was so heinous that only God can forgive them, provided they repent. But I still pray for them every night."
- 2) These interesting statements which must be examined in light of Scripture.
 - a) Firstly, let's deal with the quote of Gordon Wilson. His is in keeping with the words of the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew Chapter 5). However, bearing no ill-will or grudge, whilst a necessary ingredient, is not in itself forgiveness.
 - b) Does God ever forgive where there is no repentance? No, for scripture declares, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1st John 1:9). One thing more, if one has injured me and repented not, while I can forgive him or her, the individual cannot be treated as though they had not offended. God never demanded that we ask for forgiveness, but for to confess our sins. Confession is taking sides with God in that which has been done is contrary to His character, degraded His honour and tempted Him. In the sin offering (Lev. 4), there are no references to the priest sinning through ignorance as with the others, and no reference to him being forgiven as in verses 20, 26, 31, 35. He, being the teacher of the law, ought to have known what sin was and knowing the heart of God, never needed to be told he was forgiven. However, if an individual offends me, I can forgive but until he repents that forgiveness can never be enjoyed by him. I can hold no malice in my heart against him, but I must also pray for him. Here is the value of Christ's perfect example. If we cannot forgive, we can pray for God to forgive him.

What is the Biblical criteria for forgiveness?

- 1) As with so many other subjects, the doctrine of forgiveness is not built on the thoughts of any man, nor any single verse of Scripture. It is best to look first at forgiveness by God.
 - a) God's forgiveness is associated with the two distinct, yet related matters of (1) Salvation, and (2) Fellowship with the Godhead. In both instances it is conditional upon repentance. The first, salvation, is judicial, the second, fellowship with God is parental.
 - i) Forgiveness following the precedent of God.
 1. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that God would not require man to forgive on lesser grounds than what He himself is prepared to do. But there is stronger evidence in support.
 - ii) Forgiveness based on the teaching of the Lord
 1. In Luke 17:3-4 the Lord Jesus said, Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.
 2. If repentance was not a prerequisite, surely the Lord would have made no reference to such! Incidentally, there is nothing in these verses, or in similar verses in Matthew 18:21-22, to suggest that the trespasses/ sins (both terms interchangeable in the NT except Eph. 2:1) are

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repeatedly of the same nature. On the contrary, they are most likely different, otherwise the 'repentance' is unlikely to have been genuine.

- 2) Is forgiveness unconditional?
 - a) The fact that the so-called Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-14) and Ephesians 4:32 are silent on the point of repentance/confession, is not grounds for the view that forgiveness must be unconditional.
 - b) Proponents of unconditional forgiveness often quote the words of the Lord Jesus on the Cross, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. (Luke 23:34) They go a stage further by suggesting that the Lord Jesus himself must have had already forgiven them! However, there is nothing to suggest this was the case, and this first cry of the Saviour should be regarded as a prayer, rather than a declaration of unconditional forgiveness.
- 3) Commenting upon the words, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do', A W Pink, in his book, The Seven Sayings of the Saviour on the Cross, stresses the same point about the need for repentance. However, he goes a stage further and rightly gives the complementary teaching of Scripture regarding the aggrieved party's attitude towards the offender. He writes: Christ did not personally forgive his enemies. So in Matthew 5:44 he did not exhort his disciples to forgive their enemies, but he does exhort them to "pray" for them. But are we not to forgive those who wrong us? This leads us to a point concerning which there is much need for instruction today.
- 4) Does scripture teach that under all circumstances we must always forgive? I answer emphatically, it does not. The word of God says, "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee saying, I repent, thou shalt forgive him" (Luke 17:3,4). Here we are plainly taught that a condition must be met by the offender before we may pronounce forgiveness. The one who has wronged us must first "repent", that is, judge himself for his wrong and give evidence of his sorrow over it. But suppose the offender does not repent? Then I am not to forgive him.
- 5) But let there be no misunderstanding of our meaning here. Even though the one who has wronged me does not repent, nevertheless, I must not harbour ill-feelings against him. There must be no hatred or malice cherished in the heart. Yet, on the other hand, I must not treat the offender as if he had done no wrong

Returning briefly to the so-called Lord's Prayer, since the request, 'Lord teach us to pray' came from his followers, and with the resultant instruction given them, it is clear, as alluded to earlier, that the forgiveness element concerns fellowship with the Godhead, and not salvation (in the past tense). The apostle John deals with this more comprehensively in his first epistle — (1st John Ch. 1).

It is also worth noting that after the teaching of 'The Lord's Prayer' in Matthew 6, the Lord Jesus immediately returns to the forgiveness aspect — For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (v.14,15). This shows how important this subject is!

It might be that people sometimes use words such as 'forgiven' and 'forgave' to describe a condition of heart which is nothing more than the absence of ill-will or grudge. That said, it would be presumptuous to suggest that some claims of forgiveness in the absence of repentance are not genuine. However, as already made clear overleaf, God, who is righteous, demands confession cum repentance for both salvation and fellowship, and it is therefore not unreasonable to assume that this should be the norm.

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Having clarified that Scripture does not demand forgiveness where there is no repentance, it is equally clear, as also previously stated, that Scripture demands that we do forgive in those situations where there has been genuine repentance.

Two final things must be said about sin, repentance and forgiveness. Forgiveness by man, and indeed by God, does not necessarily mean the absence of serious consequences of the sin. Secondly, often allied, but, again not the subject this pamphlet, is the matter of discipline where the offender is a member of a church fellowship. Church elders have a clear obligation to investigate all reports of sin, and to take any action that may be required in accordance with Scripture.

In conclusion —

- 1) Forgiveness is not unconditional
- 2) Christians must be ready to forgive upon certain conditions being met, namely repentance
- 3) Forgiveness in these circumstances must be full, not partial.

*Adapted from the pamphlet, Forgiveness — Full, Partial, Conditional or Unconditional
by Alan McIlwaine, N. Ireland*