

SOME COMMENTS ON THE DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS

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I

"The Moving Finger writes; and having writ
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it."

In these words Omar Khayyam reminds us of one of the inexorable conditions of human existence—the irrevocability of the past. What has been done has been done.

It is evident that there is much good in this condition of our existence. For example, the fact that the past cannot be recalled or done over provides a basis for concentration upon today and upon those passing opportunities which are inherent in the living situation.

However, related to the irrevocability of the past are a number of problems. Consequences of yesterday's actions live in today. The immortality of influence looms large among the significant facts of nature. Again, there are memories of things gone by. In some instances these consequences and memories are to the good. In other instances, they are unfortunate. Good or bad, nothing can be wholly undone, and more than one individual is handicapped by results flowing from yesterday's irrevocable record.

Probably in all the world there is no responsible adult person whose record does not include some kind of failure, mistake, or missed opportunity. How fine it would be to go back and transform the failure, erase the mistake, or seize the lost chance! But the past is beyond recall. And sometimes today is heavily weighted by the consequences of what has gone before.

The problem goes still deeper. More than a few persons who could carry the natural load of the consequences flowing from their failures, mistakes and missed opportunities with at least a fair degree of adequacy, are having an exceedingly difficult time of it. They

have doubled or tripled the normal load of living by taking on those dread visitors of the human mind—morbid regret, unrelieved remorse, a sense of guilt. The living consequences of the failures, mistakes, missed opportunities, are unfortunate enough; the weight of added regret, remorse, and a sense of guilt may be intolerable.

Probably there are situations in which regret plays a constructive role. Looking to the past with the sense of not having done so well, one may be inspired to try harder and do better next time. But that is quite different from the kind of regret, remorse, or sense of guilt which has a deterring effect.

There is danger that we shall oversimplify the feelings of remorse and guilt, or that we shall fail to recognize their true origins and nature. In many instances they are linked with psychophysical conditions which go deep and with which we are not qualified to deal. In some cases the individual's imagined failures, mistakes, and missed opportunities are non-existent. It is possible, if not probable, that his own explanation of his difficulty is inadequate or incorrect. Be that as it may, the thought of the irrevocableness of the past may disturb him as he carries his burden of anxiety and remorse. For our present purposes, our major concern is with those individuals who have actually failed in some more or less significant enterprise, or who have erred in some meaningful situation, or who have missed some worthwhile opportunity. The natural consequences are unfortunate, but not necessarily devastating. Yet, there is the haunting sense

of regret, remorse, or guilt. Theirs is the sincere desire to find a more meaningful life, but the past seems to weigh too heavily.

In dealing with such persons who, as one psychiatrist put it, drag the past with them, it sometimes becomes evident that they have a feeling of being isolated from something or someone of considerable significance. Seemingly they have been estranged from something or someone regarded as a source of security or satisfaction. A meaningful relationship has been broken. Somewhere in their experience attitudes have been built conducive to this response. For example, a child may have been given teachings which tie in with his adult feeling of being "out of harmony with life" or separated from something in the nature of things of primary importance. When a theological interpretation is put upon the situation, the individual may regard himself as estranged from God. To find his way back, to establish oneness with that Greater Something which has a claim upon him, and so enjoy the blessings of that relationship, seems to be his problem. Often it is not a matter of seeking easy release from the natural consequences of failures, mistakes and missed opportunities. Rather, it is the desire to feel a sense of oneness with that which is deepest in the nature of things and from which one has seemingly become a fugitive.

The foregoing considerations give rise to a number of questions. One of the most important is this: Recognizing the irrevocability of the past, is there anything in the nature of reality in terms of which the individual who is haunted by the consequences and memories of past failures, mistakes, or missed opportunities, and who sincerely desires a harmonious relationship with the deeper currents of reality, may find hope?

To this question the Christian religion has had considerable to say in the

affirmative. And much of what has been said has been formulated in THE DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS.

II

Christian Theology has said the worst and it has said the best there is to say about man. It has seen his nature as fallen, corrupt, inherently evil. On the other hand, it has exalted man in making his redemption the central program of a cosmic scheme. No matter how evil man might be, he has still been regarded as worth saving, in the sight of God.

According to many of the traditional theologies, man's rightful relationship with God has been broken through sin.

"In Adam's fall
We sinned all."

To the black mark of original sin is added man's accumulated sin across the years. Man is estranged from God. Forgiveness and restoration are the desired goals. However, this poses a difficult problem for God. God, we are told, is a God of justice who cannot close his eyes to evil. The moral character of deity requires that sin shall not go unpunished or its terrible consequences obliterated. However, man is in a helpless situation. His nature being what it is, he is inclined to evil, and is quite incapable of meeting the obligations of the sin which has burdened man from the time of Adam's fall.

In this situation, God in his mercy, finds a solution. Jesus Christ — God incarnate — comes to dwell on earth. Being divine in nature, he is not under the taint of original sin; being human, he is capable of taking man's burden upon himself. He lives a perfect life, and finally dies upon the cross. The terrible penalty of sin is fully met. And thus, just as in Adam all men fell, so in Christ all men may find salvation. God's problem and man's problem have been solved — forgiveness is possible for man, and the character of God has not been compromised.

In its application the traditional doctrine offers the possibility of forgiveness along the way. The individual may be forgiven for more or less serious errors day by day and year by year. In terms of given techniques he may continually renew his rightful relationship with God, and thereby be spared, in a degree, the burden of accumulated tensions. Thus, in its application, the traditional doctrine not only gives assurance of the possibility of divine forgiveness by virtue of certain plans, attributes, and activities ascribed to deity; it brings the availability of that forgiveness into the passing experiences of the individual. By virtue of the cosmic pattern and program and through techniques the individual may find a sense of release day by day.

Precisely what is involved in forgiveness and how it is appropriated varies somewhat in differing theologies. The common points, however, are clear — man has been estranged from God through sin; man's broken relationship with God is restored; the burden of the past is removed; man may look to the future with hope and expectancy. It is also to be observed that some doctrine of assurance is usually, if not always, associated with the doctrine of forgiveness. A further point of significance is that the divine initiative is fundamental in paving the way for forgiveness.

It will readily be seen that the traditional doctrine is designed to meet the problem suggested earlier in this discussion. Failures, mistakes, missed opportunities need not necessarily shut out a person from the blessings of oneness with God forever. Restoration of a broken relationship is possible. Doubtless the doctrine of forgiveness in its traditional form has been religiously significant to multitudes of individuals. As to whether it has sometimes proved harmful by way of creating needless fears and anxieties, or by diverting attention from present concerns of value, is another problem with

which we need not engage ourselves at this point. Our concern is with a doctrine which has played an important role, and on many occasions, a helpful role, in the history of the Christian religion.

However, increasing numbers of people are finding it difficult to discover very much meaning for themselves in the traditional doctrine of forgiveness. The basic human problem remains; the proposed solution has lost reality.

The basic difficulty is clear. The whole structure of thought involved in the traditional view is raised upon the basis of a supernaturalistic world-view. Man and nature are here; God is there. Man and nature are evil; God is good. Nature is devoid of resources adequate for man's salvation; God in his heaven is sufficient. Man is estranged from God, but God is not part and parcel of the stuff of the world with which man deals; instead, he is a God removed whose condemnation of sin is an other-worldly condemnation and whose salvation is an other-worldly salvation. That such a God actually exists is seriously doubted by increasing numbers of people. That such a salvation is a particularly meaningful salvation may be doubted with equal seriousness. The consequences of failures, mistakes, missed opportunities are present consequences; the values we would find are present values; the oneness with God we would achieve is a present oneness; and the forgiveness we seek is a present restoration with the divine factor in the universe, bringing in the living present the lasting fruits of real religion — a sense of peace and a sense of importance.

To be sure, the traditional doctrine offered forgiveness, but so often the kind of sin for which it offered forgiveness was non-existent or misunderstood; the condemnation of God it made so vivid was sometimes an artificial or misinterpreted condemnation. In the

meantime, it diverted men's thoughts from real evils and real values in their midst — the natural consequences flowing from failures, mistakes, and missed opportunities; the natural values which life affords when lived in harmony with the immanent God. The traditional doctrine too often functioned chiefly in solving problems of its own creation, while marching past, almost as though they were unimportant, the living and inevitable human problems rooted in the stern condition of the past's irrevocability.

III

No greater tragedy can befall any individual than to lose rapport with God. When this misfortune occurs in some degree, there is no greater concern than the restoration or realization of such rapport. The possibility of such restoration is one of the sublime facts of human experience. It is the possibility of forgiveness.

Now the God with whom we sometimes lose rapport (in some instances through failures, mistakes, missed opportunities) is resident in nature. We may apply the term "God" to those aspects of reality in terms of which we achieve religious values. Oneness with God is both an intrinsic and an instrumental value. The feeling of oneness with God is worthwhile in and of itself. Again, submission to, identification or cooperation with God may be essential in achieving some specific religious value in a specific situation. One such religious value is the finding of hope in the face of misfortune inevitably flowing from some failure, mistake, or missed opportunity belonging to the irtraceable past. To find this religious value requires something basic in the nature of things in the existence and operation of which man is helped to move beyond the misfortunes of yesterday, reinterpret those misfortunes in the light of a larger pattern, and enter into a quality of life more in harmony with deity.

The traditional views of forgiveness have stressed the divine initiative in the forgiving process. It is God from whom man is estranged; it is God who initiates restoration. God is thus both an end and a means. This is a valid insight whether our theology be one of transcendence or immanence. Man cannot work out his salvation in isolation. He is dependent upon factors related to his life and yet greater than himself. The desire for forgiveness and the will to be forgiven is not enough; there must be a forgiving God.

The traditional theologies began with a conception of God as transcendent and for the most part static. These two ideas created severe difficulties in working out the salvation of a man lost in nature. Indeed, the difficulties gave rise to quite as many problems as ever were solved, and many of the alleged solutions were verbal solutions in the last analysis. Anselm and others, for example, worked hard and long seeking to make intelligible a system of divine bookkeeping over accounts that some people are not sure were ever opened.

When we come to an acceptance of a process metaphysics, and a theology of immanence which flows therefrom, we are saved from some of the inevitable logical difficulties wrapped up in the supernaturalistic scheme; furthermore, the idea of a divine initiative and activity in terms of which man may outgrow, to some extent, the weight of the irrevocable past, becomes more intelligible. Perhaps some persons have associated forgiveness only with a theology of transcendence. Meditation on these matters, however, may lead us to the conviction that the immanent God functions far more vitally and reasonably in the process of helping individuals gather together fragments of a broken experience and then go on to make the most of the rest of life.

Sometimes we miss the big and really important factors in a situation just because they are so evident. We con-

centrate upon the immediate situation, and miss the larger trend. A naturalistic doctrine of forgiveness will be built out of "larger trends" in nature, so large we sometimes miss them under the pressure of some immediate situation. Taking a long-range view, we may make the following affirmations with considerable assurance: (1) In nature we find "certain uniformities in the behavior of things." A more popular, although sometimes a somewhat misleading, way of putting it is that the universe is law-abiding. (2) Activity and change are fundamental characteristics of nature. (3) Creation and growth are fundamental aspects of nature. In these three statements we have the basis of a naturalistic doctrine of forgiveness.

(1) As we sow, we reap—eventually. In terms of the law-abiding behavior of nature we suffer and we are saved. The same natural laws in terms of which we get sick are those in terms of which we get better. Because nature is at least relatively dependable we must suffer for errors but we also enjoy the hope of an improvement.

Insofar as the traditional doctrines of atonement and forgiveness insisted that there is something inexorable in the character of God, they were at one with the contemporary view of the law-abiding character of reality. Nature may not always be predictable, but neither is she utterly capricious. There is no compromising the character of God in terms of which given causes lead to given results under given conditions. A realistic doctrine of forgiveness, then, can have nothing to do with an easy erasing of the past. A personal friend may say of some wrong that has been done, "Let's forget it." Nature, in her wider reaches, unlike the personal friend, never harbors conscious feelings of resentment or condemnation, save on the human level; on the other hand, neither does she ever completely "forget it." Nature never holds a

grudge, but she does exact a toll. There is no escaping the laws of cause and effect or the immortality of influence. The mills of the gods grind slowly but they grind exceedingly small. That is one of the most stern and inspiring facts. It is stern because there is no escaping consequences of unfortunate actions. It is inspiring because there is a certain dependability in the behavior of the resources in terms of which the individual is helped to stage a "come-back" in life. There is nothing fickle or small about the God of nature. A triumph through and over failures, mistakes, and missed opportunities through knowledge of and cooperation with the basic laws of reality is a victory for the individual; but it is also a victory for God.

(2) Reality is dynamic; it is of the nature of activity; nothing stands still. Change is one of the "big facts" of the universe, so evident we sometimes miss it. We sometimes respond to situations as though they were going to remain as they are forever. The ancient king learned a deep truth from his wise men who taught him that in any situation he might well remember, "Even this will pass away." If it be true that change is conducive to uncertainty, it is equally true that it is indispensable for an improvement in one's lot. An individual may feel that through failures, mistakes, or missed opportunities, life has closed its doors upon him. But the utter hopelessness of such an attitude belongs to a static rather than a dynamic view of reality. A process theology is unsympathetic to the notion of finality. Something is always going on.

Living in the kind of universe we do, it is thus inevitable that new factors should come into the life of every person. As those new factors come the situation and the possibilities of the individual are changed. Today is somewhat different from yesterday, and tomorrow will be somewhat different from today.

This is no guarantee that tomorrow will be better than today, but it is a guarantee that tomorrow's problem will not be precisely that of today. There is value in knowing that.

Again, the fact of change removes one from events which once seemed exceedingly distressing. The poignancy of regret may be alleviated through change. Again, each new day brings with it new resources which are resident within the potentially expanding and deepening experiences of that day. Again, the day probably brings new materials with which to work, new people with whom to deal, new work to do, new opportunities to explore. To a degree, we are what we are by virtue of our environing situation, and as sure as change is real, there is going to be variation in our situation. The weight of yesterday may be real, but there is a pull which belongs to today and tomorrow.

The fact of change is operative not only in the world outside of man; it is operative within man himself. Obviously, modifiability in the human make-up is relative, but no person stands still through the passing years. There-in is hope.

Thus, it is the nature of things to change and go on. The God of nature exacts a toll but condemns no one to an unchanging existence. That lowest hell—a state of unrelieved sameness, in which individuals are continually perishing of boredom and hopelessness—is a creation of the mind of man, but contrary to the ways of God. The divine element in reality is on the march, and invites those who will to come along.

(3) A third aspect of the natural process is creation and growth. Through a reorganization of factors a new reality comes into being. With the introduction of new factors brought into a new synthesis, realities of increasing complexity possessing increasing capacities emerge.

It is possible for man to draw upon

and relate himself to those aspects of nature engaged in creativity and growth and so to enter into their life. In so doing, he finds the real heart of forgiveness; he achieves a measure of rapport with deity, for one of the functions of God in some situations is that of creation. We may say, then, that forgiveness is not erasing the past; it is outgrowing the past. It is organizing the materials of today into a meaningful kind of life, sustained and encouraged by those ever-present aspects of reality which further development.

Growth takes place in a number of areas and in a number of ways in the human realm. There is of course physical growth, but there are other kinds, too. Growth in one's intellectual interests and achievements, in one's aesthetic appreciations, in the quality of one's human associations, are all significant types of growth. To grow in these and other directions one moves beyond the past and into the present all at the same time. We grow by entering into deepening and expanding experiences in terms of which one relates himself to a widening environment and to an increasing number of wholesale connections. We grow by putting ourselves in situations which are conducive to growth—wherein we are exposed to influences which nourish the body or spirit of man.

Related to the creative and growing aspect of nature, is the healing activity in nature. An injury is suffered, but immediately there are activities initiated designed to bring healing to the wound. The past is not retraced; the consequences of the injury are real; but through the operation of natural processes the injury is outgrown. The healing activity which serves to heal a physical wound operates in other areas of experience as well. There is healing in the mental and moral areas as well. Such healing is not an eradication of the past; it is a moving beyond the past, reorganizing the present and changing elements in the emerging sit-

uation into a new quality of wholeness. This healing activity is operative in human experience, but it is extra-human. It is a major aspect of the divine activity. In terms of it, forgiveness is realized.

Such, in brief, is the direction which the formulation of a naturalistic doctrine of forgiveness may take. By virtue of the dependability of nature, the fact of change, and the creative phase of reality which finds expression in growth and healing, the individual may hope for at least a measure of release from the shackles of past failures, mistakes and missed opportunities, in the sense of moving on into a finer quality of experience. The past cannot be undone, but in a measure it can be outgrown. It is the nature of nature to go on and to grow on. Within limits, the individual can enter into this going and growing character of things.

One cannot be insensitive to the tragedy of someone whose life has been impoverished through mistakes of some kind. But sometimes we see that individual gathering the redeemable fragments of his broken experience, and setting out to make the most of the rest of his life. In time he finds himself living a meaningful life, meaningful to himself and to others. Life is not just as it was before; perhaps it is quieter and deeper and simpler. In one way or other things have worked out so that his life has found significance in the light of the more enduring realities. When we see this take place, we might well put off the shoes from our feet, for the ground whereon we stand is holy ground. We are in the presence of divine forgiveness.

IV

One of the tasks incumbent upon the church is that of making explicit a credible doctrine of forgiveness.

Just how the religious technician, working in the church, will carry out this responsibility is a question of considerable interest and importance. The

following comments are intended only as a few observations related to the problem:

1. The church ought to be a "spiritual home" in which the individual finds it easier to look at difficult situations realistically and hopefully. This being true, it is imperative that a realistic doctrine of hope be preached from the pulpit; an encouraging spirit be manifested in counseling; and an atmosphere conducive to confidence and growth be created in the various church situations.

2. Any credible doctrine of forgiveness must grow out of a credible doctrine of God. This means that God must be interpreted meaningfully — a God of dependability, of change, of creation, of growth, of healing. From such a God no person can ever become completely estranged, and in such a God there is always a measure of hope. Walt Whitman, the poet of nature, has written:

"Not till the sun excludes you do I
exclude you,
Not till the waters refuse to glisten
for you and the leaves to rustle for
you, do my words refuse to glisten
and rustle for you.

....

"Whoever you are! you are he or she
for whom the earth is solid and
liquid,

You are he or she for whom the sun
and moon hang in the sky.

For none more than you are the
present and the past,

For none more than you is im-
mortality."

3. If the doctrine of forgiveness is to be significant, it must be presented realistically. The forgiving process is difficult, sometimes terribly difficult. Again, forgiveness is a matter of degree, and there is such a thing as building up false hopes. Again, some individuals are destined to live the rest of their lives within exceedingly narrow limitations some of which have been brought about through failures,

mistakes, missed opportunities. Anything the religious technician says must be true to these considerations.

4. In presenting the doctrine of forgiveness, as in presenting any of the great doctrines, the minister must be scrupulously careful that he speak sincerely—or not at all. We can be reasonably certain that in every congregation of any size there is someone to whom this theme is of tremendous importance. Ruskin wrote, "Great men do not play stage tricks with the doctrines of life and death: only little men do that." There is too much at stake for anything but the real thing, brought with integrity of purpose. And Professor Whitehead has written, "... the primary religious virtue is sincerity, a penetrating sincerity."

5. It is well for the religious technician to remember that much of the good to be accomplished in relationship to the problem under consideration, by the church, is of a preventive character. Negatively, this means avoiding an unwholesome theology which encourages such concepts as "an unpardonable sin," a God who watches your every act and remembers everything you do, a standard of perfection which each person is expected to achieve but can't, other-worldly rewards and punishments. Positively, it means building wholesome attitudes based upon a realistic view of nature, including man. It is well to remember the importance of childhood experiences and impressions in this connection.

6. In dealing with an individual who desires to speak of some failure, mistake or missed opportunity, it is usually not well to assure him at once that what he has done or failed to do really isn't important. Perhaps it is important to him. On the other hand, if he insists on talking a great deal about his past mistakes, etc., the chances are that his real difficulty lies elsewhere.

7. It is well to avoid letting the individual feel that the counselor feels

that something is forever hanging over him which he must somehow try to make up for. The emphasis is not upon trying to blot out some past error; it is upon laying hold of possibilities which are now emerging. The major claim of life is not from the past; it is from the present. Thus, there is considerable value in the individual relating himself to some significant activity in which he can invest himself with interest and effort. Acts of penance have a significant place in the forgiving process, but such acts need to be directed toward the growth of the individual, rather than toward a mere erasing of the past.

8. In some situations it may be possible to help an individual extract values, positive or negative, from aspects of his record which he has been regarding as wholly unfortunate. No failure, mistake or missed opportunity should be permitted to go down in the record of one's life as all loss. An insight of some kind ought to be gained thereby. It is true that the past is irrevocable, but the significance of that past is not yet wholly determined. Man's inner response to the external fact is an item of importance.

9. Sometimes the most effective preaching is through seemingly incidental remarks. There are some problems which sometimes cannot best be approached by a frontal attack. Many a sermon, not on the specific theme of forgiveness, may include sentences and phrases which nevertheless have implications in that direction. The interested listener will get at least some of these, and will go on to insights of meaning to him—especially meaningful if he thinks he has discovered them for himself.

10. Any adequate church program must present specific techniques, both in services of worship and in other situations, in terms of which the continuing benefits of forgiveness may be appropriated. The mere statement of the theory that forgiveness is pos-

sible is not sufficient; the church must offer techniques in terms of which the religious value of forgiveness may be found. What specific techniques should be employed will vary with specific individuals, needs, and situations.

11. In the last analysis any long-term effectiveness in preaching or counseling in the area touched by the doctrine of forgiveness, involves an appreciation of the worth of persons on the part of the technician. Of Helen Keller's teacher it was said, "She was willing to spend a lifetime burrowing for a soul." In the long run something of that spirit must be present in the religious technician who would proclaim the doctrine of forgiveness effectively.

Phillips Brooks — who is qualified to speak of these matters — closed his Lyman Beecher lectures, discussing "The Value of the Human Soul." What he says of the preacher might well be said in particular of the minister who would make real the doctrine of forgiveness: "There is a power which lies at the centre of all success in preaching, and whose influence reaches out to the circumference, and is essential everywhere . . . Without this power preaching is almost sure to become either a struggle of ambition or a burden of routine. With it preaching is an ever fresh delight. The power is the value of the human soul, felt by the preacher and inspiring all his work."

THE POETRY OF WORSHIP

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for us is to take us out of ourselves. This is the principle of self-commitment. Only once or twice in a lifetime may the worshiper find the still windows of heaven opened and the radiance of God streaming through. But that once or twice is enough. When the upward striving of men is met by the downward **agape** of God, worship reaches its climax and achieves its deep intent. By it we are lifted into a splendor, a vast grandeur we had not known before. Horizons are expanded; clouds of self-entanglement are dispersed; we glimpse a place above struggle, boredom, and pain:

I have desired to go
Where springs not fail,
To fields where flies no sharp and
sided hail
And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be
Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the
havens dumb,
And out of the swing of the sea.

There is a Love that urges on our asking, our desiring. It finds us only when we lose ourselves in it; yet it will not let us go. This is the center and soul of worship. When our thoughts of God, the action in which we partake, and the words we speak bring us in this way to ourselves and from ourselves, our worship is offered in spirit and in truth. This must be the church's gift to our warring world. "The time cometh and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship Him."