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Main content

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Abstract: Responses to recent tragedies have shed a national spotlight on forgiveness. In psychology forgiveness means to let go of justifiable anger against an offender and to offer the offender an unmerited gift. Using material from Robert Enright, Gregory Jones and Miroslav Volf, this essay engages a three-cornered conversation concerning forgiveness as understood in psychology, satisfaction atonement and the author's atonement model, narrative Christus Victor. The question concerns whether God's forgiveness is a model for human forgiveness. Forgiveness in satisfaction atonement depends on God first receiving justice through the death of Jesus. Here, what God models is the opposite of forgiveness as a letting go of anger without prior payback. In narrative Christus Victor, God does forgive without first exacting justice. Here, God does model human forgiveness. These findings then have implications for our understanding of the image of the God who is fully revealed in Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

Recent high-profile tragedies have shone the bright light of publicity on acts of forgiveness. After Seung-Hui Cho shot thirty-two students and teachers and then himself at Virginia Tech in 2007, news stories reported touching words and acts of forgiveness expressed by students at Virginia Tech. A mother of two, for example, said: "Forgiveness is part of being freed from anger ... I try to teach my children that God loves everyone." (1)

The 2006 shooting of ten Amish girls at West Nickel Mines school, five of whom died, garnered attention in news stories around the world. So did the forgiveness expressed by the Amish community for the shooter, Charles Carl Roberts IV, and the support--both emotional and financial--the Amish community offered his wife and children. (2)

When Dany Heatley, a star player with the Atlanta Thrashers of the National Hockey League, crashed his speeding car in 2003, he suffered severe injuries but was able to resume his hockey career a year later. However, Heatley's passenger, his friend and teammate Dan Snyder, died six days after the accident. To the amazement of the hockey world, Snyder's family, who attend Elmira Mennonite Church, embraced and forgave Heatley, and visited him repeatedly during his hospital stay. They opposed imprisonment when he pleaded guilty to second-degree vehicular homicide and encouraged him to return to his hockey career. (3)

To express forgiveness rather than hate and anger attracted attention. The accounts of these three tragedies--whether planned or accidental--show that forgiveness has become newsworthy.

This article explores a series of interrelated questions concerning forgiveness, atonement theology and violence. One is to ask whether the practice of forgiveness by humans and by God run on parallel tracks or are fundamentally different movements. For the Snyders and the Amish community, forgiveness involves letting go of what many people see as justifiable anger. The next section, on the psychology of forgiveness, deals with this movement: letting go of justifiable anger. The question then arises: Is God's forgiveness also understood as a letting go of anger against sin and sinners? Or does an entirely different image describe God's forgiveness of us, of...

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