

Forgiveness and Reconciliation for Survivors of Sexual Abuse

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I think my experience is that it is as I've heard the stories of survivors and their families that I've come to a much greater and clearer realisation of the awful effect of child abuse.

I think one of the issues that we have going forward is to somehow enable a wider group, more people in the church, to actually become aware of the impact in a real way. It's one thing to know the policies, it's one thing to do the training, it's one thing to be aware, but actually getting the degree of harm is a significant thing to try and enable people to catch on to.

Moving Towards Forgiveness and Reconciliation....

- Context: what is forgiveness: who is forgiving who?
- The facets of forgiveness
- Practically: how to work on forgiving
- Guilt vs Shame and Forgiveness
- Redemptive forgiveness: towards Shalom

The Forgiveness Project

<http://theforgivenessproject.com/>

The Forgiveness Project uses the real stories of victims and perpetrators to explore concepts of forgiveness, and to encourage people to consider alternatives to resentment, retaliation and revenge.



Susan....

The pressure to blindly forgive, particularly within Church teaching, can keep people stuck and unsafe. I believe this easy grace can allow abuse to thrive within families and institutions.



Susan....

I sought help in Christian literature, but could only find lovely stories about reconciliation or praying for the abuser's redemption. God forgave me, so I must forgive. This just compounded my sense of guilt, buffeted by a sea of secrets.

www.theforgivenessproject.com



“Forgiveness is not a pancake manoeuvre”

“You
can’t just
flip your
feelings”



What is forgiveness?

A definition of forgiveness from the Oxford English Dictionary:

- *To stop feeling angry or resentful towards (someone) for an offence or mistake.*
- *To excuse (an offence, flaw, or mistake)*

Greek ethics and forgiveness

Nearest equivalent concept is:

“sungnome”

*Recognition; understanding; forbearance;
pardon; excuse; right judgement.*

When did ideas of forgiveness begin?

In the Hebrew bible:

“forgiveness was the gift of God to people who were members of the Jewish covenant community who kept the law. God’s forgiveness restored people to grace and to God”

What was this forgiveness?

From a place of humility:

“I do not think it is possible to come up with a definition of forgiveness and I do not think that the Christian Scriptures are unequivocal when it comes to forgiveness”

Bash, A. (2015). *Forgiveness: A theology*. Location 371 of 2399

Forgiveness and the new testament: a nuanced view:

Paul:

- Few *explicit* reference to interpersonal forgiveness

“when Paul uses the word ‘charizomai’ to refer to interpersonal forgiveness, he is thinking of a gift of kindness and mercy that one person gives another”

Love is in the underlying, guiding principle...

From the gospels

Mark:

- Strong assertions re forgiving anyone anything
- Forgiveness is a marker of the Kingdom of God – therefore its members who are being reshaped are themselves to be forgivers.

Luke:

- An emphasis on wrongdoer repenting and taking the initiative to seek forgiveness.

Who is forgiving who?

“In the Christian Scriptures, divine forgiveness and human forgiveness are seen as interdependant on one another, thereby giving interpersonal forgiveness a central place in the way the Christian gospel is presented and explained”

Bash, A. (2015). *Forgiveness: A theology*. Location 1018 of 2399

Back to forgiveness for survivors of sexual abuse: after Cherry

Trivial Hurt



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graph TD; A[Trivial Hurt] --> B[Serious Hurt]; B --> C[Significant Hurt]; C --> D[Shattering Experience]
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Serious Hurt

Significant Hurt

Shattering Experience

The facets of forgiveness



Prism as a metaphor for forgiveness



The problem: many facets

- Forgiveness is multi-layered and complex in nature, and very difficult to do.
- Metaphor and hyperbole help us to understand, and misunderstand, forgiveness
Eg: Matthew 18: 22; 23-35
- The problem of sexual abuse and forgiveness: can we/should we encourage it?

Divine and human forgiveness are not the same.

- ‘Pure’ forgiveness belongs to God.
- ‘God can set aside human sin and so choose to purify and cleanse. God can remove sin and its effects by taking away the sin, and God can choose not to remember sin’ (Bash, 2015,p. 81).
- Human forgiveness can, at best, only ever be incomplete, and may be described as ‘forgiving behaviour’ (Bash,2015, p. 86).

Forgiveness is intrapersonal and interpersonal

- Intrapersonal forgiveness: receiving God's forgiveness into ourselves
- Interpersonal forgiveness: offering it out to others (Jamieson, 2016, p. 29)
- Being forgiven leads to forgiving
- Jesus brought these two aspects of forgiveness together on the cross

Forgiveness: an action in time, and several actions over time

- ‘...one has to be realistic and recognise that sometimes the work that led to the act of forgiving is in fact incomplete or unravels, and what formerly was forgiveness is no longer so. One can have more forgiving to do even when we thought we had forgiven all variants to forgive (Bash, 2015, p. 62).

Links in the chain



Forgiveness is for sin

- Forgiveness is God's gift 'to those who are remorseful, repentant, and who, when it is appropriate, offer reparation for what they have done' (Bash, 2015, pp. 33, 81).

Forgiveness is not, in the first instance, applicable to shame

- This is a qualified statement.
- When one person shames another through an act of sexual abuse, that person is the guilty one, the one who needs forgiveness. The shamed one neither needs to ask for forgiveness, or to receive forgiveness for that act imposed upon them.
- When an abused person's shame leads to attitudes and behaviours that harm themselves or others, seeking forgiveness becomes relevant. Shame, though, is the lens through which such actions are most helpfully viewed.

‘Legal’, relational, and practical dimensions

- Legal exchange model of forgiveness: only part of the story
- Relational model is theme throughout the Bible
- Practical outcomes of forgiveness following sexual abuse are not diminished in importance when they are held within the whole context of Scripture. Matthew 5:24 holds the idea that the *perpetrator* of wrong doing, not the *wronged* person, is responsible for genuine actions of repentance, restoration and reconciliation if he is to be forgiven by God.

Preparation is necessary

- Stories of forgiveness in the gospels do not contain the detail that leads to the forgiveness given and received, that does not mean there is no process of preparation.

Example: the 'prodigal son' story

- Survivors need support as they work through their *particular* responses to abuse, to learn about receiving forgiveness where appropriate, so they might move towards forgiveness.

Forgiveness: Three fields of meaning

- Forensic
- Therapeutic
- Redemptive



(Shults and Sandage, 2003, p. 20)

Comments on forgiveness by Judith Herman

(Trauma and Recovery, 2015, pp. 189-190)

‘As the survivor vents her rage in safety, and helpless fury gradually changes into a more powerful and satisfying form of anger: righteous indignation. This transformation [frees the survivor] from the prison of the revenge... it offers a way to regain a sense of power without becoming a criminal herself. Giving up the *fantasy of revenge* does not mean giving up the quest for justice; on the contrary it begins the process of joining with others to hold the perpetrator accountable for his crimes.’

Herman (cont)

The opposite of the revenge fantasy is the *fantasy of forgiveness*, which is also an attempt at empowerment. ‘The survivor imagines she can transcend her rage and erase the impact of the trauma through a willed, defiant act of love. But it is not possible to exorcise the trauma, either through hatred or love. Like revenge, the fantasy of forgiveness often becomes a cruel torture, because it remains out of reach for most ordinary human beings. Folk wisdom recognises that to forgive is divine. And even divine forgiveness, in most religious systems, is not unconditional.

Herman (cont)

‘True forgiveness cannot be granted until the perpetrator has sought and earned it through confession, repentance, and restitution.

Genuine contrition in a perpetrator is a rare miracle. Fortunately the survivor does not need to wait for it. Her healing depends on the discovery of restorative love in her own life... once the survivor has mourned the traumatic event... she may even feel sorrow and compassion for [the perpetrator]... but this is not the same as forgiveness’.

Steps toward forgiveness...



How Does Forgiveness Education Affect the Willingness of Clergy to Forgive?

- **Learning about the forgiveness process** increased the experimental group clergy's knowledge of interpersonal forgiveness, thereby helping them to more readily consider forgiveness as a primary problem-solving strategy.
- **The forgiveness intervention** had the effect of affirming the value of forgiveness to clergy as evidenced by their increased willingness to forgive and preference for forgiveness among alternatives over the duration of the forgiveness program.

George Jacinto, B. E. (2011). Therapeutic Stages of Forgiveness and Self Forgiveness. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 423-437.

Stages of Forgiveness

Claiming the Hurt



Guilt (Responsibility)



Victim



Anger



Wholeness

Meninger, W. A. (2009). *The Process of Forgiveness*. New York: Continuum.

1. Claiming the Hurt

“When we forgive evil we do not excuse it, we do not tolerate it, we do not smother it. We look the evil full in the face, call it what it is, let its horror shock and stun and enrage us, and only then do we forgive it.”

Smedes, L. B. (1984). *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 79-80.

2. Guilt/Responsibility



Whose responsibility
was it?

3. Victim

“it is not unlike the grieving process. It gives what is due to past hurts. It can however perpetuate itself by becoming itself a new kind of pain – the pain of bemoaning and regretting pain”

Meninger (2009)



4. Anger

‘The anger of the fourth stage is positive and forward looking....we refuse to be victimised any longer. We thrust ourselves forward out of the mire we had been embogged in and look around ourselves.’

Meninger, (2009, 63).



5. Wholeness



“Realising our hurt and our hurter, knowing what we did (or did not do) to facilitate the wounding, having mourned our suffering and determined to do something about it, we now proceed to do it.....we refuse to let our lives be ruled by past mistakes, our own, or those of others.”

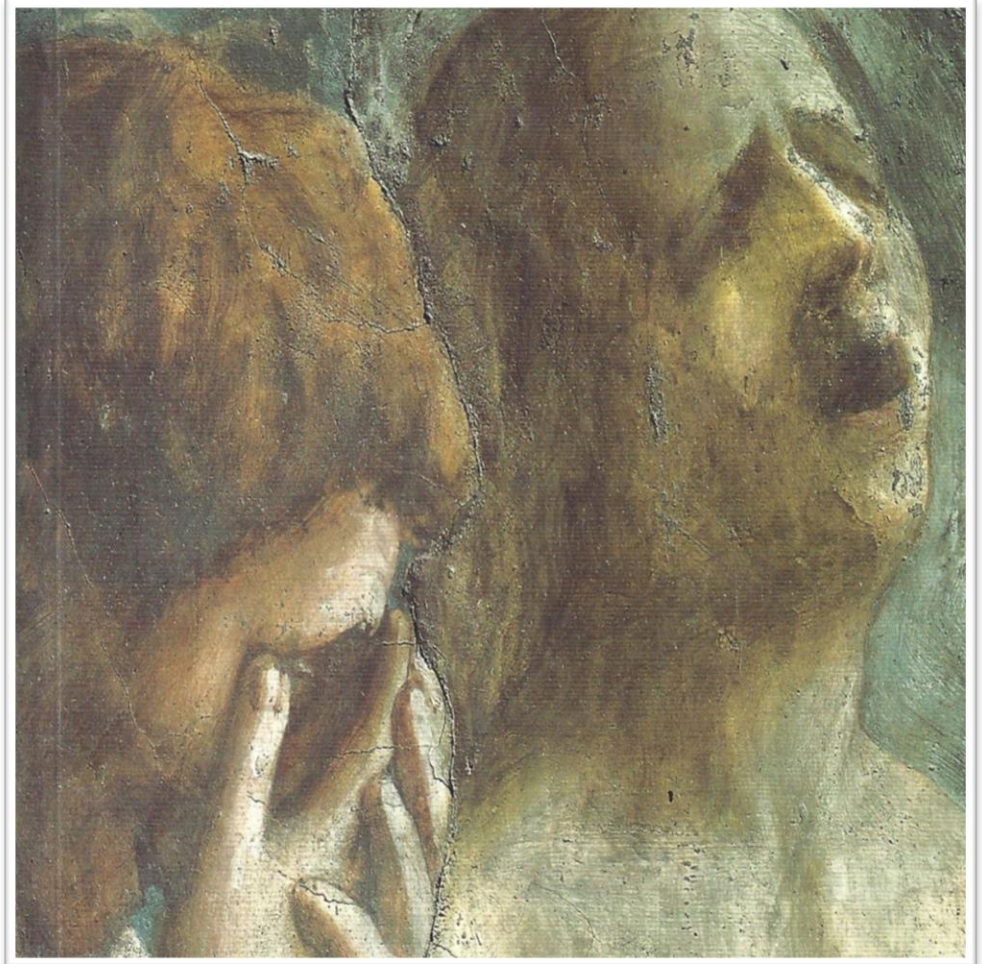
Meninger, (2009, 69).

Crossing the threshold of forgiveness

“As you realise that your wounds are healing or are healed, you begin to say “I truly have nothing to be angry about....”. This is when you cross the threshold of [complete] forgiveness....You realise that you could not truly forgive in response to a command. Real forgiveness cannot be squeezed out of a sense of duty: it is freely given or not at all....It is an act of love”

Meninger, (2009, 71).

Guilt and shame: barriers to forgiveness



Massaccio: The Expulsion

Separating guilt and shame

- Guilt and shame: interrelated but distinct
- Guilt: about behaviour - *doing* something bad
Shame: about identity – *being* someone bad
- Shame is always painful because it involves the exposure of private aspects of ourselves. It makes us want to hide, to disappear, even to die. The shame of sexual abuse makes people feel unworthy, unacceptable, unlovable; dirty, defiled, unwanted.

Guilt and shame in the story of Adam and Eve

- A familiar and unfamiliar story
- The association of guilt with sin
- Failure to attend to shame
- A look at the text:
 - action, reaction, defensive behaviours,
 - personal and interpersonal consequences

Shame is part of the larger story of sin, but not sin in itself

Shame for the survivor

Shame, when it arises from sexual abuse and other forms of violence, leaves deep wounds for the person who is abused. It is far more likely to be a problem for this person than guilt.

‘Incest and rape are two distinct types of sexual abuse that activate intense inner state of powerlessness, bodily violation and humiliation. In the midst of shame, one feels to blame. Childhood incest generates poignant often crippling shame... when the experience of violation, helplessness, and betrayal is disowned, the self withdraws deeper inside to escape the agony of exposure’ (Kaufman, 2004, p. 121).

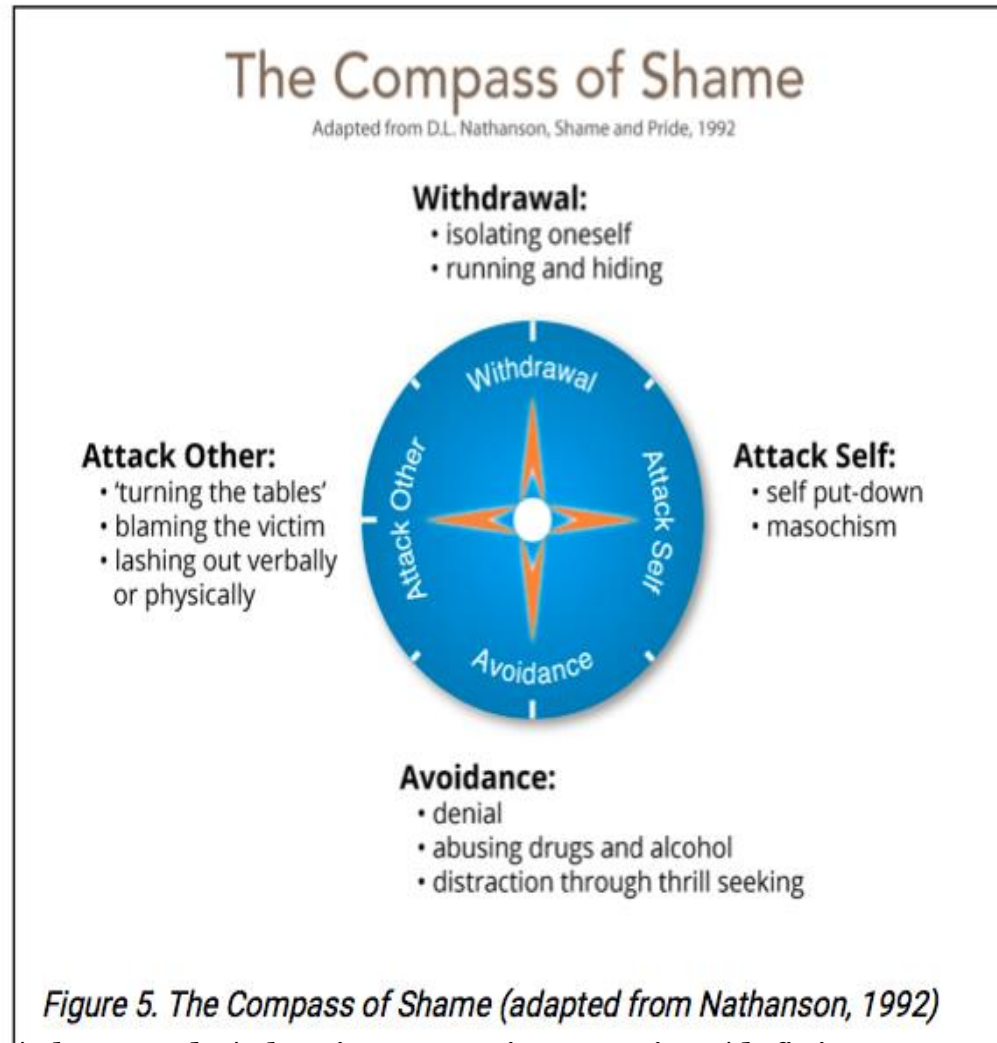
Acute and chronic shame

- Acute shame is temporary
- Chronic shame is enduring

Shame action or feeling: what do we actually mean?

- Shaming another
- Feeling shamed by another
- Being ashamed as an ongoing state, OR
- Being ashamed because of what I've done that I don't approve of

Defences against shame



Shame and forgiveness

- Shame separates us from others, and distorts our perceptions of ourselves and others, including God. Like Adam and Eve, ‘we hide from the God who approaches, not because of who he actually is, but because of who we fear him to be’ (Jamieson, 2016, p. 36). Forgiveness, then, is likely to be inaccessible when shame is prominent in our experience.

Pastoral responses to shame

- Stories of abuse are constrained by shame: defences help people to avoid feeling it
- We can impede or aid the telling of these stories
- Become aware of the signs of shame experience and 'stay with them' all the same
- If we make space for shame in our conversations with survivors, it can be told, shared, and eased
- Acceptance and empathy are the antidotes to shame

Forgiveness is God's work, not ours

- This is God's world, and survivors of abuse are in God's care. Clergy, pastoral carers and counsellors and professional standards workers are thus relieved of the responsibility for making forgiveness happen. God does not need us, although God does choose to use us (adapted from Dittes, 1999, p. 146).
- We are God's links in his process towards a survivor's forgiveness: to receive and to offer. May each of us be one of those links and allow God to bind them together into his chain of forgiveness.

What about that question?

- The problem of sexual abuse and forgiveness: can we/should we encourage it?
- Would it be better to ask:

In what ways can I be a link
in God's chain?



Forgiveness and Shalom

“If we are to be true to the scope of the [scriptural] narrative, then the mission of God is understood as bringing order out of chaos, of light prevailing over darkness, and in fulfilment of the creation project, manifest in the flourishing of all creation.”

Harris, T. (2017). Chapter 5 Shalom, Gospel and the Mission of God. in publication

Forgiveness takes courage...

28.

Forgiveness takes courage and determination. Dig deep and you will find the strength you need.



Schnell, D.D. (1993) *Forgiveness Therapy*. St. Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press.

Forgiveness in Hard Places

“Oh Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; *remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering* – our comradeship, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all of this, and when they come to judgement, let all the fruits which we have borne, be their forgiveness”

Dowrick, S (1997) *Forgiveness and other acts of Love*, p.334.

Redemptive forgiveness

“forgiveness, like the father running down the road to meet the prodigal son, flows from God’s abundant love and compassion towards us....

It is to know the grace and love of God in such a way that it undoes us, breaks us open, breaks our hearts so that we may receive a bigger self.... being defined by God’s image and God’s goodness, not by abuse”

Thomson, H. (2008). Forgiveness. *St Marks Review*, 107-123.



Towards Shalom....

“Christian forgiveness aims at reconciliation and involves the task of responding to God’s forgiving love by crafting communities of forgiving and forgiven people....”

Shults, F. LeRon & Sandage, Steven J (2003). The faces of Forgiveness. Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Mich.



Resource List

- Atkinson, S. (2006). *Breaking the Chains of Abuse: a Practical Guide*. Oxford, UK: Lion Hudson
- Cherry, S. (2012). *Healing agony : re-imagining forgiveness*. London: Continuum.
- Forgiveness Project: <http://theforgivenessproject.com/>
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- Parkinson, P. (1997). *Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
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