

# TWO RESPONSES TO “FORGIVING ENEMIES IN IRELAND” BY NIGEL BIGGAR

## Forgiveness, Compassion, and Northern Ireland: A Response to Nigel Biggar

Stephen N. Williams

We can distinguish three strands in Nigel Biggar’s essay: (1) detailed recommendations; (2) a political ethic; and (3) a fundamental moral framework. His essay moves from the last to the first, but I both reverse the order in the following comments and concentrate attention on the last. Although the essay is a coherent whole, it is possible to accept much in (1) and (2) while worrying about (3). A response like the following is most helpful if it focuses on questions or disagreement rather than on the many points of agreement, but if this were a review rather than response, it would give fuller reason for why the first and last word is one of appreciation. Nigel Biggar’s essay bears all the hallmarks of the morally rich and elegantly argued proposals that invariably edify readers of his work.

I want to say a little about the detailed recommendations. One additional factor to take into account in judging the effectiveness of a Truth Commission is the small geographical area of Northern Ireland, something that also bore on the wisdom (leaving aside the moral propriety) of the early release of prisoners who had engaged in partisan acts of violence. In the streets of Belfast, the capital city, the only sizable city in Northern Ireland and smaller than the largest cities in England and Scotland, you can bump into someone convicted of the murder of a family member. Northern Ireland has two universities, though one of them has more than one campus. An ex-policeman, a member of the old Royal Ulster Constabulary, had to be removed from an examination room in one of the universities, because it was found that he was in close proximity to a murderer whom he had helped put away, himself sitting a university examination. Within the six counties that make up Northern Ireland, whoever tells the truth in public can never be far away from you, if all are residing in the North. It is a factor that counts against a Truth Commission inspired by the practice in South Africa, although it is only one factor in the reckoning.

I will not comment on public memorials. One reason for this is that the discussion in Biggar’s paper includes the phrase “keeping forgiving, compassionate faith, if you like, with naïve, misguided, ill-fated

humanity" (2008, 574), and I explore later the underlying connection made here between forgiveness and compassion. It is possible, of course, to accede to his suggestion on public memorials while differing on the basic moral framework, or to agree on the framework while resisting an annual public ritual of commemoration.

I will say a little, but not much, more on the political–ethical stance taken in the discussion on “the reconciliation of persistent enemies” (2008, 566). I agree both with the need to make some kind of moral judgment on the justification for violence, and the significance of the fact that what we are asking about is the reconciliation of partisans. However, I am not clear on how the logic of the argument is working here. The two components that go into what I take to be part of a moral judgment are (a) the author’s sympathies, rooted in his family background, and (b) the claim that “no political arrangement can presume on being ordained by God” (2008, 567). I am not clear how these successfully cover the moral ground. The language of sympathy, sadness, and Irish components of Britishness does not seem to add up to a *moral* judgment. Moreover, while it may be true that “no political arrangement can presume on being ordained by God” in a sense dependent on romantic nationalism, it does not follow that the issue of justice, as regards the political future of Northern Ireland, cannot be resolved in principle.

Now I may appear to take back with my left hand much of what I am giving with my right. For it can certainly be argued—and many of us think conclusively—that a moral–political perspective on the history of Ireland justifies *neither* the claim that Ireland should be a single political entity *nor* the right of Northern Ireland to remain a separate state (leaving the question of violence out of account for a moment). However, there might be such a thing as “relative justice,” as Reinhold Niebuhr used to argue cogently, and it is surely important to have this categorically available. I think that Biggar would agree that his position on reconciliation presupposes that the outcome of a chimerical attempt to resolve the issue of the political future in terms of “dispassionate justice” will be massively inconclusive. However, when we are trying to get people to *listen to* and *hear* each other, we are gesturing in the direction of a moral basis to political resolution that at least asks about what is relatively just, and does not assume that immutable partisanship is an inevitable given, which marginalizes and makes morally irrelevant any attempt to take up a position that is “non-partisan.”

Perhaps I am being naïve at best. In any case, I come out on this one where Biggar does. I add only that the Irish component of Britishness, which he does not want to lose, needs examination. Northern Ireland Unionists often do not feel “Irish,” a word or notion that encompasses the history and culture of the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, their lack of clarity on whether they can identify themselves, politically or culturally,

as British or not (Northern Ireland is not constitutionally part of Great Britain, but of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), and frequent lack of any independent sense of identity can be thoroughly demoralizing for them.

What is problematic in Biggar's essay, it seems to me, is the position taken in it on the relation of forgiveness to compassion. I agree both with the general desire to prevent forgiveness being a rival to justice, and with the broad principle of his insistence that we distinguish moments in forgiveness. One thing that has not changed in the United Kingdom—though it is not distinctive to the land—is the level crossing, where road and rail track intersect so that barriers go down to prevent the two streams of cars, traveling in opposite directions, from crossing the tracks when the train is coming through. It suggests an image of forgiveness. The lifting of a barrier in one's own heart is a kind of forgiveness; yet the telos of forgiveness is reconciliation, and if the other's barrier stays down, forgiveness is restricted to a changed disposition and does not amount to a restored relationship. A distinction with a family resemblance, perhaps a close one, to that of Biggar can be mapped onto this image, or the image mapped onto the distinction. Nevertheless, several difficulties appear to me to attend his account.

First, we have to take into consideration a wider range of phenomena than is taken in this essay. Perhaps there is a way of conceptualizing the whole situation that obtains between perpetrators and victims in terms of a trust broken and needing to be restored, although I would not do so myself. More significantly, there are a number of situations where the rational process of forgiveness and reconciliation as described in his essay does not apply, not because the damaged cannot psychologically bring themselves to think rationally, but because the question of compassion may not factor in. In trauma, the self is shattered, and even when treated with utmost wisdom and delicacy, there follows a long process of healing and reintegration. While bitterness and hatred remain in any human heart, the fractured self remains, but some forms of violence cause wounds of such a disintegrative nature that there is not enough remnant energy in the victim for bitterness or hatred to dominate or direct the emotional pain and turbulence. Forgiveness-as-compassion presupposes a certain level and certain kind of moral energy. If restoration from trauma can go far enough for the mind of the victim to rest consciously and with relatively dispassionate reflection on the perpetrator of the violence, the dynamic of forgiveness will take a different form from the dynamic of a less complex, though still complex enough, movement from bitterness and hatred to reconciliation. It is not to be denied that deep healing includes the ability to think about the other without being in the emotional grip of hatred or bitterness. However, clear-minded consciousness of transgression and willingness

to forgive need not be formed in their very marrow in conjunction with actual compassion. In some cases, it is not a matter of someone having no compassion as opposed to having compassion; it is a matter of compassion not featuring in the equation at all or not necessarily or not centrally in this “moment” of forgiveness.

Understandably, Biggar does not have the space to elaborate on his interpretation of forgiveness, and I am following suit in asserting more than arguing. However, even if I have got things wrong thus far, I do not think that the argument for compassion on grounds of sympathy for the perpetrator holds. Doubtless there are some individuals who are mysteriously less able than others to resist the pressure to do evil or who could save themselves from doing terrible evil only by “an extraordinary moral heroism” (2008, 561), but presumably not all perpetrators of violence are like this and so victims should not think of them as such. There remains the reflection that the victim “is no stranger to the psychic powers that drive human beings to abuse each other” (2008, 561). True, but we are in danger here of not naming evil as evil and of denying that some individuals are mysteriously more able than others to carry out certain acts. Naming a thing for what it is lies at the heart of genuine openness to truth. Here, I think that Biggar and I, who have been friends for many years, part company in the way that we understand the human condition; I am unable, for example, to see how Jesus’s treatment of Zacchaeus can be viewed in terms of “compassionate forbearance” (2008, 560 n. 3), and I think that our differences are theological rather than exegetical.

The reason why compassion is essential to forgiveness, on Biggar’s analysis, is that we are all in the same boat, all sinners who share solidarity in sin and solidarity in destiny, all included in post-mortem reconciliation. This last eschatological point is highly contentious in the Christian tradition, of course, but does not, in any case, ground any biblical injunctions to forgive. As regards our human solidarity in sin, we must indeed welcome the determination expressed in his essay not to let us forget that perpetrator and victim are united in the shared human condition. It is a truth that, in its way, cannot go deep enough *coram deo*. The question pivots not upon its truth, but upon its application to the relationship between forgiveness and compassion.

In his preface to *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche shared his alarm at the growth of compassion in Europe, the sinister sign of cultural decay (1887/1994, sec. 5).<sup>1</sup> These are quite chilling words and we may justifiably regret that they were written, and yet many readers

<sup>1</sup> As Biggar seems to use sympathy and compassion synonymously and Nietzsche’s *Das Mitleid* appears as “sympathy,” “compassion,” or “pity” in different translations, I will not make distinctions.

of Nietzsche discover throughout his literature colossally unfair and dangerous statements that are nevertheless shot through with insight that is worth attention. When Schopenhauer, who influenced Nietzsche, identified *agapē* with *karuna* (compassion), he effectively reduced *agapē* to one of its forms, for God is *agapē*, yet the triune God is not internally related in mutual compassion and there is more to inter-human love than compassion (see, for example, 1965). We may certainly believe that Biggar's inclusion of compassion at the heart of forgiveness is a world better than Nietzsche's elimination of it, even if we modify that description of what Nietzsche is doing when we take his whole work into account. However, Nietzsche does seem to have sensed that compassion can be made to bear relatively too much weight in our analysis of human being.

When matters of forgiveness are in question, we reach human depths. It may appear that divine forgiveness is motivated by an infinite compassion—and I do not wish to deny or downplay it—but it is a far more complex matter than that in the Christian tradition and has to do with the restoration of moral order (the word sounds hopelessly weak when we are thinking of holiness, or good and evil) in the cosmos and with matters of justice that can neither be identified with nor subordinated to compassion. In a fuller account of the topic that concerns us, we would need to ask to what extent divine forgiveness is the pattern of human forgiveness, bearing in mind both that divine forgiveness is not grounded in a consciousness of sinful solidarity with humanity and that human obligation to forgive leaves certain matters of justice up to God, not because justice is a rival to forgiveness, but because eschatological divine justice is not to be identified with temporal human forgiveness. “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord”: while granting entirely that this is no vengefulness of the human type, I am a bit puzzled as to why Biggar calls for both vengeance and purely retributive punishment to be ruled out while allowing that resentment remains morally appropriate, although it must be “moderated.” Leaving that aside, the deeper the wound, the profounder the “moral formation” required to forgive, and where that capacity is formed, springs of compassion for the human creature are released.<sup>2</sup> That is indeed true; yet there are ways of evil and forms of violence so horrendous that the purest and humblest consciousness will surely be aware that our world features both a mystery of shared iniquity and a mystery of distinguished iniquities that we cannot unravel but should not risk obscuring by sympathy.

<sup>2</sup> “Moral formation” is shorthand; from a Christian perspective, the phrase does scant justice to the operation of divine influence in the heart.

At the conclusion of *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen has a memorable portrayal of a kind of forgiveness, when Solveig takes Peer back. The roots of this forgiveness do not appear to be planted in the soil of compassion, at least not as we are thinking of it in this essay; Solveig finds that Peer has “sinned in nothing,” even though he has callously abandoned her, and her overwhelming love for him is a redeeming love, if Peer will only find his identity in it. The scene, like the whole play, is of rare power. From Biggar’s point of view, I opine, this love, however wonderful in force and mysterious in depth, is flawed because it is morally somewhat misguided, failing to view the transgression realistically enough and so failing to integrate *appropriate* compassion into forgiveness. Perhaps we will, with him, dare to remonstrate mildly with saintly Solveig on the subject of her idealism. However, does not too much idealism, in its own way, also go into the proposal to implicate compassion inextricably in forgiveness? I wonder. God’s forgiveness; Solveig’s forgiveness; the forgiveness of the traumatized; the forgiveness of which I think that Biggar speaks—they are not *unius generis* and perhaps, reflecting on them, we realize that they should not be.

The Northern Ireland “peace process” is a misnomer. It usually names only that political arrangement that is notionally a contribution to social peace, and what it achieves for social ethos is very limited indeed. If the ethos of a society is to change, I am not convinced that people are to be uniformly encouraged to think in terms of forgiveness-as-compassion, although, of course, this is only one component in Biggar’s argument. And so the political expression of forgiveness should be alternatively grounded. I hope that my response does not sound churlish. I greatly appreciate much about the combination of moral sensitivity and historical realism in this essay. We could all do with it in Northern Ireland.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Susan Williams, who specializes in the area of trauma, for her comments on an earlier draft of this response, although she might formulate relevant arguments a bit differently.

## The Offer of Forgiveness

David Tombs

Nigel Biggar's analysis of forgiving enemies in Ireland is a typically lucid, provocative, and timely contribution to debates on the "Troubles" and their legacies. Like Biggar, I am a theologian from England, and having lived and worked in Northern Ireland for the last seven years on a Masters program in Reconciliation Studies, I can vouch for both the continuing sensitivity and the emotion that exists on many of the questions that he raises.<sup>4</sup>

Northern Ireland is a society in which religious beliefs and thinking shape social values and political behavior much more obviously than in other more secular western European societies. Political issues are often influenced by religious concerns in direct and sometimes dramatic ways. For example, an attempt to restore the devolved assembly founded in December 2004 in part because the Rev. Ian Paisley, who was then the leader of both the Democratic Unionist Party and the Free Presbyterian Church, demanded a public show of repentance through "sackcloth and ashes" from his political opponents in Sinn Féin, before he was willing to enter a working relationship with them. By the time that the St. Andrews agreement of November 2006 finally brokered a new working relationship, which would permit Paisley to serve as First Minister alongside Martin McGuinees of Sinn Féin as Deputy First Minister, Paisley had become more cautious in his public calls for signs of repentance by his former enemies. After briefly raising the subject of repentance one more time, he allowed it to drop and did not push it further. However, nobody can ignore that even if Paisley was finally willing to accept that there can be a form of political reconciliation without public repentance, there are many of his supporters in the Protestant community who cannot or will not accept this, and many of them base their opposition on what they see as Christian convictions and biblical teaching on the relationships between repentance and forgiveness.

In this brief response to "Forgiving Enemies in Ireland," I first wish to affirm the value for debates here in Northern Ireland of the conceptual distinction that Biggar offers on the two "moments of

<sup>4</sup> In much of what follows, I am indebted to conversations over the years with my former colleague in the program, the American Mennonite Joseph Liechty. See especially his essay, "Putting Forgiveness in Its Place" (2006).

forgiveness.” I will also suggest that this distinction between different moments of forgiveness can perhaps be pressed even further, in terms of a journey of forgiveness, in which there may be many moments. Second, while Biggar is also correct that both moments of forgiveness need to be recognized and given their appropriate place, I will propose that from a theological and biblical point of view, the distinctive significance of extending compassionate forgiveness unilaterally deserves particular attention. There are strong biblical and theological reasons for emphasizing the unconditional offer of forgiveness. While these need to be set against the philosophical and psychological concerns that might be raised against them, there is more in their favor than might first appear. It should be possible for the churches in Ireland and Britain to do more to promote unilateral forgiveness while avoiding, or at least mitigating, some of the pitfalls that its critics warn against.

### 1. Biggar’s Two Moments of Forgiveness

One of the reasons that discussions about forgiveness in Northern Ireland are so contentious is that people can mean very different things when they speak of forgiveness. All too often, in arguments over whether Christian forgiveness should be conditional or unconditional on repentance, it is assumed that the meaning of forgiveness is clear and universally accepted, and that it is only the practical application of forgiveness that is contested. This is particularly the case when speaking of forgiveness from a faith perspective, since both Catholics and Protestants tend to assume that their religious understanding of forgiveness is representative of the whole Christian tradition, and also that it should be normative, or even definitive, for a more general public understanding.

Biggar’s distinction between the two moments of forgiveness is a particularly helpful step in showing how different understandings over terminology can create misunderstandings and half-truths, and how more careful attention to language and terminology can avoid this. He contrasts the unilateral and unconditional moment of “compassion,” as distinct from the final and conditional moment of “absolution.” He sees these as two different moments in a Christian and responsible process of reconciliation that involves them both, and which should not be reduced to either. As he shows, each moment has its own distinctive logic, dynamics, and integrity, and conflating them together in assessments of the ethics of forgiveness runs severe risks. Nowhere is this more so than in discussions of pre-conditions of forgiveness and especially the vexed question of repentance as a pre-condition.

The distinction between the two moments of forgiveness is particularly valuable in Northern Ireland given the tendency (perhaps more in

Protestant thought than in Catholic thought) to see forgiveness primarily in terms of a *single decisive act* rather than as a *longer-term process* that can take place gradually over an extended period of time. Experiences during the Troubles confirm that forgiveness may not happen all at once; it is often a journey lasting years or even decades. To pick this up in terms of Biggar's distinction, it might be suggested that the two moments that he points to stand out at either end of a process. Many journeys of forgiveness are marked not just by these two discrete moments but by many key moments on a spectrum from the initial offer of forgiveness to final absolution. Likewise, repentance is rarely a single decisive moment but often a gradual process in which different stages can be seen. Each of these moments, in both forgiveness and repentance, needs to be considered in its particularity if the relationship between them is to be understood.

## 2. The Unconditional Offer of Forgiveness

There is one area, however, where I think Biggar underplays a distinctively Christian approach to forgiveness and the conditions that might go with it. This is seen most clearly in the parity that he gives to the two moments of forgiveness. He criticizes both those who give priority to compassion (for example, Fiddes or Jones), and those who give priority to repentance (for example, Swinburne), and argues instead that both are necessary. He does not explicitly say that they are "*equally necessary*," or even "*equally important*," but the impression that he gives in saying that they are both "*half-correct*" and "*half-wrong*" appears to be that a Christian ethic should emphasize both equally (2008, 560–62). In some ways, this even-handedness is an ethically attractive middle way. It preserves the unconditionality of forgiveness-as-compassion, and balances it with a clear conditionality for absolution. However, I would contend that despite its attractiveness, from a standpoint of distinctively *Christian* ethics, this even-handedness underplays the radical edge of the biblical and theological perspective on forgiveness.

In claiming this, I realize that I am out of step with the dominant understanding of forgiveness and repentance in Northern Ireland. Christian contributions on forgiveness here tend to see biblical and theological teaching as emphasizing repentance, as indicated in Paisley's calls for "sackcloth and ashes." Failure to stress repentance is often denounced as unbiblical and derided as morally weak. However, I agree with Fiddes and Jones that the biblical and theological arguments point more toward an understanding of forgiveness that is unilateral and not conditional on repentance. Indeed, it is notable that Biggar himself describes supporters of forgiveness-as-compassion as

usually arguing from “biblical and theological grounds,” whereas he sees those who advocate repentance as a condition as doing so on “philosophical and psychological grounds” (2008, 560).

In the New Testament, Jesus’s teaching on forgiveness is often striking, perhaps even scandalous, in its generosity. The emphasis is much more on the unconditionality of compassionate forgiveness than its conditionality. Repentance is usually presented in the Gospels as the response to forgiveness, rather than the condition for it. It is hardly surprising that philosophically and psychologically, then as now, this way of thinking at first seems deeply impractical or even irresponsible. However, God’s unconditional offer of forgiveness, manifest in the grace of compassion, is one of the most profound ethical and theological insights presented by the New Testament. There is a strong case for believing that Christians should model their hopes and behavior on this counter-intuitive—and in many ways, counter-cultural—gracious love. As Joseph Liechty points out, this aspect of forgiveness is even by chance suggested in the English word “forgive” in its similarity to “fore-give” or “give before” (2006, 62).<sup>5</sup>

Against this, some might point to the differences in understanding of historical context between now and New Testament times, and therefore caution against any straightforward excavation of ethics from first-century texts. They could argue that the expectation of an imminent eschaton might have justified a short-term “irresponsibility” on forgiveness at the time, but precisely because there is now a different understanding of end times, the Gospel emphasis on the unconditional offer of forgiveness is not a sound basis for contemporary Christian ethics. However, while there are psychological, philosophical, and theological issues that those who give primacy to the unilateral offer of forgiveness need to address, I think proponents of unilateral and unconditional forgiveness have a stronger case than is usually acknowledged.

Psychologically speaking, as Biggar points out, the offer of forgiveness can have a liberating effect on the one who offers it, regardless of the reaction of the one to whom it is offered. Biggar points to the proper care of one’s own soul as a reason to reach out in forgiveness-as-compassion. A willingness to extend the compassion of forgiveness can be properly and primarily self-oriented, and not just directed at the good of the other. In this self-oriented sense, forgiveness is a letting go—as best as one is able—of the destructive legacies of hurt, pain, and victimhood, in order to restore one’s life to a better balance and open it to new opportunities, insofar as this is possible. Such self-oriented

<sup>5</sup> Liechty acknowledges that this is entirely coincidental, but it is a useful indication of where a Christian emphasis on forgiveness should be placed.

concern guards against the temptation to a downward and vicious spiral of revenge, and against the slower but no less self-destructive gradual corrosion of the soul through festering bitterness. Psychological compassion for oneself can be as much of a motive for this self-oriented forgiveness as compassion for the other can be for extending forgiveness to the offender.

This is not to suggest that either the move to let go of one's feelings or to extend compassionate forgiveness to others can be rushed. People need time and space to negotiate the different moments of forgiveness at different speeds, and in the order that is appropriate to them. Forgiveness has to be embraced in its own time, and in some cases, those who have suffered and are still in pain may have great difficulty in starting the journey of forgiveness. There needs to be sensitivity to victims who feel unable to forgive. There are legitimate reasons to resist premature calls to offer forgiveness if the offer cannot be made with sincerity. Preaching that victims are "bound to forgive their oppressors unilaterally and unconditionally" is both counter-productive and potentially abusive (2008, 560). If the churches were to do this, they would be as much at fault as those in the media, who have sometimes asked bereaved family members in the immediate aftermath of a killing whether or not they forgive those who have been responsible, and then splashed their first reactions across newspaper headlines.

However, while forgiveness cannot be forced, there are reasons for the churches to call for it and promote it, to support and encourage those who feel wary of it, and to gently challenge those who see it as coming at too high a personal cost. As Biggar points out, "Even victims have responsibilities" (2008, 561). In the long term, letting go of bitterness and hurt is good for victims. Likewise, reaching out to extend forgiveness to others for wrongs that they have done, and being open to receive forgiveness for wrongs that one may have committed are vital steps if prolonged conflict is to be left behind.

The notion of a journey into forgiveness, rather than a single act of forgiveness, can help victims to embrace some aspect of forgiveness even if they feel they cannot yet fully forgive. Recognition that forgiveness is often a journey that covers different moments can help people to take smaller and more sustainable steps toward forgiving. At the same time, there will be cases where an impulse to forgive needs to be matched by a willingness to protect oneself, or others that one is responsible for, from further damage or abuse. In such cases, however, it is not the offer of forgiveness per se that is the problem; rather, it is the lack of necessary protective action to accompany it. In many cases, the offer of forgiveness needs to be linked to practical actions that protect oneself from further damage; indeed, the offer of forgiveness should be secondary to first ensuring safety and protection. A

commonly cited example is domestic abuse, especially those cases where women forgive violent partners in the hope that the partner's behavior will change. In many cases, professions of repentance for domestic abuse amount to very little. There is usually a pattern of behavior that is hard to break, and professions of repentance can be ways of sustaining this pattern rather than changing it. The issue of safety and protection needs to be given priority and considered quite separately from either the offer of forgiveness or the profession of repentance.

At a theological level, some might question whether what is true for God is also true of human beings, given their nature as limited, fallen, and sinful beings. The difference between the human and the divine should not be underestimated, and it is possible that it would not just be over optimistic but actually dangerous to expect people to model their behavior on God. There are a number of important questions here. If Christians are to follow God's own example in extending unilateral forgiveness, what role does repentance have to play? Is the call to promote the unilateral offer of forgiveness without also pressing for repentance ultimately irresponsible and likely to contribute to injustice? Perhaps the specific challenge for the churches here is: would it be responsible for the churches to promote this unilateral offer of forgiveness without an equal and balancing concern for repentance? While there would be many in Northern Ireland who would see this unilateral forgiveness as undermining repentance, I think proponents of unconditional forgiveness have a stronger case than this allows for.

Clearly repentance by wrongdoers is something that should always be welcomed, and in many cases will precede any offer of forgiveness. Where this happens, the difficult issues discussed here will not arise. The problem is more relevant where forgiveness-as-compassion is being offered but the response is either ambiguous or stops short of the repentance that Biggar sees as necessary for absolution. In such cases, does the unilateral forgiveness of compassion have its own unconditional logic and integrity, or does it only retain credibility if it is eventually linked to repentance or some other condition?

To consider this, it is helpful to make a further distinction between acknowledgment and repentance. This in turn can be linked to a distinction between the unconditional *offer of forgiveness* and the conditions that attach to the *acceptance of forgiveness*. Thus, it is possible for someone to initiate the unilateral offer of forgiveness without repentance or any other requirement being placed on the wrongdoer as a pre-condition. In this sense, forgiveness is indeed unconditional, and the churches should find ways to appropriately challenge believers to model God in this. However, although it is possible for a victim or survivor to offer forgiveness for an offense that

the offender does not repent of, or even acknowledge, an important asymmetry needs to be noted between victim and perpetrator here. In order for offenders to accept forgiveness, there is a condition. They must acknowledge the offense, at least inwardly to themselves, or there is no logical possibility of accepting the forgiveness that is offered. I should stress that this is a point of logical necessity irrespective of ethical viewpoint. It is logically and conceptually impossible for an offender to accept forgiveness for an offense that he does not acknowledge as wrong. Accepting forgiveness is logically dependant on acknowledging a wrongdoing, but there is no logical necessity that the wrongdoer repent.

The importance of this distinction is that it offers a new layer in understanding the pre-conditions of forgiveness and the place of repentance. This helps first to distinguish the offer of forgiveness and the acceptance of the offer, and then to distinguish both of these from absolution. The conditions that accompany each moment vary, but repentance is not a condition for either the offer of forgiveness or the acceptance of forgiveness. In terms of the offer of forgiveness, there are no external pre-conditions or constraints governing the offer of forgiveness, beyond what the offended party is psychologically ready to do. In terms of acceptance of forgiveness, there is a logical condition of acknowledgment of wrongdoing by the wrongdoer in her acceptance of an offer of forgiveness, but there does not necessarily need to be an expression of repentance. The ethical integrity of the offer of forgiveness does not depend on repentance by the wrongdoer. If Biggar's analysis of different moments of forgiveness can be extended in this way, it might help to support an even stronger case for unilateral offers of forgiveness as a distinctively Christian contribution to the forgiveness of enemies in Ireland.

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