
Learning How to Forgive is Built on a Bridge Between Faith and Science: Forgiveness Amidst the Intertwined Pandemics of Hate and COVID-19

Position paper submitted in response to the call for proposals for the project Ciencia, Fe Y
Esperanza (Science, Faith and Hope)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“It is not the leader’s responsibility to have all the right answers. It is the leader’s responsibility to make sure they are asking the right questions.”

Dr. Ray Anderson,
Fuller Theological Seminary

The Question

What is “the question” being presented and is it the right one? In our view the question is simple, do our stakeholders (i.e., pastors teachers, students, families) know how to forgive others and/or themselves? And equally importantly, do they recognize the physical, spiritual and social consequences for being unforgiving? In the midst of a global pandemic which causes tremendous anxiety, stress, and frustration for so many families, communities, and organizations, forgiveness needs to be a leading coping response. The offender is a faceless, invisible offender that is commonly resulting in financial distress, spousal and family conflict and abuse, and economic hardships that cause us to blame others, lash out at loved one’s and friends, and further aggravate the epidemic of loneliness that has been spurred on by the current COVID-19 crisis.

Why this is the right question

Our Christian theology and logic is basic and sound. If there is a God (and we believe there is), and if that God took flesh in Jesus Christ (if Christmas is true, and we believe it is) the question is why? Why did God choose to take flesh and dwell amongst his creation? The answer to that is given to Jesus’ earthly father before his birth when “an angel of the Lord spoke to him in a dream saying...and his name shall be called Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. (Matt. 1:20-21).”

How does he “save his people from their sins?” Through his sacrificial death on the Cross: “for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sin (Matt. 26:28).”

The Gospel is God’s gracious gift of forgiveness to all who would believe and thus THE most important topic in history.

Our science on this topic is equally sound.¹ Forgiveness has been studied scientifically for about 30 years. Forgiveness can be taught from faith-based perspectives that support an individual’s faith beliefs and draw on motivations inspired by one’s faith. Numerous psychological principles can also be applied to foster stronger motivation to forgive. For instance, expressive writing,

prayer (a commonly studied topic in the science of psychology, and spiritual contemplation and meditation have all been applied to the development of forgiveness. Furthermore, science substantiates numerous benefits for individuals who can forgive including improved mental and physical health, as well as, improved healthy behavior.

This paper, and the project it proposes, details:

- a. the need for forgiveness education within the Hispanic community, in general, and urgently in the age of COVID-19, especially for those facing unusual challenges who blame others or themselves for their plight and need a means to cope.
- b. the way in which the disciplines of modern psychological theory and sound theological reflection can inform each other, yielding an improved understanding of forgiveness and benefits to mental, physical and spiritual health and wellbeing.

CHALLENGE

The challenge of integrating psychology and religion is easily understood. Many Christians fear that their biblical worldview will be undermined by secular psychobabble. All too often, preachers offer their congregations self-help TED Talks rather than a sermon grounded in Scripture. The fear many Christians have is real and fair. Secularists have similar fears and seem to insist in removing anything related to supernatural experience and faith from their classrooms and/or other cultural context. For both Christians and secularists, sincere dialogue seems “a bridge too far.”

We argue that these two disciplines (theology and psychology) are not mutually exclusive and can be mutually beneficial, if framed properly. In essence, we believe that forgiveness can be an exemplar of how faith and science can complement one another. The topic of forgiveness is at once both theological and psychological in nature. It involves the deepest forms of spiritual reflection and insight and evokes a cascade of emotional and thought-based responses. Forgiveness can be delineated along religious and scientific lines, but the most significant advances in understanding, practice, and benefits of forgiveness, we believe, take place not when lines are drawn to separate forgiveness into different fields of practice and inquiry but when the true intersectionality of this experience is brought to the foreground. Forgiveness is a psychospiritual phenomenon imbued with God’s Holy Spirit but at the same time embodied in human experience.²

OVERVIEW

The project we propose involves the development of an integrative faith-science curriculum for the teaching of forgiveness. We believe that forgiveness is not only a fitting topic for the discussion of how faith and science can be viewed as complementary but rather it is perhaps the exemplary topic of choice. We say this fully aware that there are many religious virtues

(e.g., humility, thankfulness) that could be examined from a shared faith-science perspective, but few if any receive the same degree of consistent emphasis throughout the scriptures. Forgiveness is evidence of love for thy neighbor and this is well-known as one of the two greatest commandments (Matthew 22:36-40). Our project outlines the Biblical framework for the motivation to forgive and, assuming motivation is forthcoming, our project outlines multiple avenues by which to pursue forgiveness teaching. Teaching and learning forgiveness is something that most folks are unacquainted with. We have developed didactic materials for inperson, virtual (i.e., Zoom), self-help (i.e., workbook), and online video-based instruction. Without going into the details of all these methods, it would be safe to summarize our approach as one that focuses on eradicating unforgiveness, or what might be closest to hatred, and facilitating the development of forgiveness through prayer, writing, and reflection. Forgiveness is our target, and it is important to be clear that we do not attempt to promote reconciliation or justice in our teaching. We reference both concepts, but mostly in an attempt to contrast them with forgiveness. Reconciliation is relationship repair, and justice is for social or legal purposes. Both can be pursued simultaneous to forgiveness, but neither is required, or denied for that matter, for forgiveness to occur.

PROJECT OUTLINE

Framework: Finding the Motivation to Forgive.

Teachers, pastors, and counselors face many of the same problems a key one being motivating individuals to desire personal improvement. A secular therapist would benefit from understanding and respecting the belief system of their Christian client. Too, Christian counselors are aided by the results of secular forgiveness research in that it displays the mental and physical consequences of unforgiveness, including but not limited to the impact unforgiveness has on family, friends, and co-workers, not to mention its impact on their personal relationship with Jesus.

Modern psychology informs the Christian faith community as to the consequences of unforgiveness, as well as educates them as to the benefits forgiveness can have in the lives of those who find the motivation to forgive. Because forgiveness is not unique to Christianity, Christians have the opportunity to herald its many benefits, as well as create the opportunity to share the source of their motivation: The Holy Spirit of God at work in the life of a believer.

The Biblical Witness as a Key Motivator

The Bible makes clear that forgiveness is not something for Christians to do when it is convenient or painless. Rather, the Bible instructs that forgiveness is a requirement of the Christian faith. For devout Christians the motivation to forgive should be powerful and urgent as is evidenced in the scripture below:

1. Unforgiveness is unforgiveable:
 - a. Matthew 6:14-15 “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”
 - i. Jesus expects his disciples to be a forgiving people.
2. Forgiveness is not negotiable:
 - ii. Ephesians 1: 7 “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.”
 - iii. Matthew 26: 28 “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”
 - iv. Mark 11:25 “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”
3. Teaching people how to forgive, in part, fulfills the Great Commission. “Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you (Matt.28:20).”

Curriculum and Outreach

Seizing on Christian’s salient need to forgive, faith and science have equal parts in the development of curricula, outreach, and preaching/teaching in any and all venues. That is, faith provides a strong motive on which science can build multiple methodologies to bring people to forgiveness. We have developed such curricula in the past and deployed them with good outcomes for both faith (i.e., pastor training, congregational engagement) and science (i.e., conference presentations and peer-reviewed scientific journal publication) communities. Our approach involves several components outlined briefly below:

1. Stakeholder (i.e., pastor, congregations, families, students) engagement
 - a. Focus groups
 - b. Needs assessments
2. Inputs from Step 1 help to guide curriculum design
3. Identify researchable outcomes
 - a. Science-based outcomes—changes in scientifically valid self-report measures of empathy and forgiveness
 - b. Faith-based outcomes—engagement of congregation or school community (e.g., attendance at trainings, reach of programming, prayer life)
4. Pilot curriculum with Hispanic pastors, congregations, and schools
5. Analyze data to evaluate effectiveness of curriculum and gather informal feedback from constituencies
6. Adjust curriculum as needed

7. Development of full-scale curriculum. Multiple forms of educational outreach would be used including:
 - a. Youth groups (in-person or virtual)
 - b. Podcasts
 - c. YouTube channel
 - d. Pastor's conference (in-person or virtual)
 - e. Christian counseling web resources
 - f. Online continuing education courses for pastors
 - g. Telehealth for students and families
 - h. Eventual global outreach through mission trips etc.

CALL TO ACTION

There are several problems that exist today regarding forgiveness:

1. No seminary, medical school and (very few) universities teach its pastors, MD's or psychotherapists how to help people learn how to forgive. It is one thing to advise people to forgive, but it is much easier said than done. It is the null curricula in our culture and churches.
2. Secular psychologists have become the primary thought-leaders in forgiveness education and research, leaving the Christian church struggling to remain relevant on the topic in an increasingly secular world. Esperanza can reclaim forgiveness education and research and serve as an encouragement for other churches to do likewise.
3. Unforgiveness is a spiritual cancer which, left untreated, will destroy a person's quality of life, health, family and often their will to live. Most importantly, it destroys their personal relationship with Jesus.

What's at Stake? In our view, virtually everything that is important now and in the hereafter hinges on our ability to forgive. The Bible makes this exceedingly clear:

1 John 4:20: Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.

So what is at stake is a very long list of truly important things:

1. Forgiveness by God.
2. Spiritual maturity.
3. Evangelism.
4. Physical health consequences.
5. Mental health consequences.

6. Reclaim forgiveness education for the church.

The leadership of Esperanza has the opportunity to create a forgiveness education curriculum and program that teaches people how to forgive, which provides relief from past wounds as well as resilience for the future. Never has this been more important as people face what is perhaps the most divisive and acrimonious political and social climate that we have experienced in decades. The COVID-19 pandemic had only made this worse. There is no shortage of viral videos, magazine covers, and newspaper headlines that all have in common one main theme: I have been wronged and it is your (insert any number of likely targets here including: spouse, family, and political and religious leaders to name a few) fault! In fact, if you were to do a Google search on who is to blame for the COVID-19 pandemic you might find that it is the fault of various different nationalities, faiths, and communities. The pandemic of intolerance, blame, and hatred is virtually unprecedented.

Valuing forgiveness as a desirable and authentically human response to the current conditions requires faith communities to create the conditions that will help those who have been harmed to offer forgiveness, and that may also help those whose actions have caused harm to be restored. Whether one's pain has come at the hands of close loved-ones and friends who have been wearied by caretaking or economic- or work-related stressors and have lashed out, or by bosses, leaders, or politicians who have implemented policies, mandates, or procedures that have hurt entire swaths of the population, there are few of us today who have not been hurt in some real way by the current status of our planet. For these reasons, we believe Esperanza is not only asking the right questions about drawing together faith and science to encourage solutions to life's largest problems, but we feel Esperanza should feel compelled to establish itself as the premier thought-leader for an integrated science- and faith-based Christian forgiveness education program within the Hispanic community.

REFERENCES

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