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Sexual Abuse and Forgiveness

Steven Tracy explores judicial, psychological, and relational biblical forgiveness in his “Sexual Abuse and Forgiveness” article. He strategically explains harmful models of forgiveness, the nature of forgiveness, practice of forgiveness, and the process of forgiveness. Steven Tracy begins his article with three stories of a well-dressed, professional woman, adolescent client, and a little girl who have all experienced not only sexual abuse, but also unbiblical responses after they have gathered the courage to speak out. Through these vignettes, Tracy emphasizes complexity and misperceptions time and time again. Confusion in religious community, family, and biblical doctrine are addressed in his article. He also speaks about the absence of definition of forgiveness in religious literature, and if it is, the definition of forgiveness, trust, and reconciliation are conflated. Within the Educational Psychology Study Group, they merely grapple and distinguish between forgiveness and reconciliation. Bustanoby, Enright and Zell, Heitritter and Vought, and Donnelly all poorly define forgiveness that does not fully grasp and recognize biblical forgiveness in all of its depth. All of these convoluted ideas and misinterpreted doctrines are clarified by the author through redefining forgiveness and looking at revenge through an evangelical standpoint. Moreover, Tracy dismisses visceral reactions to perpetrators, premature reconciliation, and forgiveness of the sexual abuser as the rape and abuse is going on.

Instead, he clearly discerns three biblical forgiveness and provides the readers practical and reasonable steps to practice forgiveness for sexual abusers and victims.

Forgiveness is not letting go; forgiveness is not restoring trust and letting go of all negative emotions, including but are not limited to fear, anger, suspicion, alienation, and mistrust; forgiveness is not the belief that if the victim does not forgive the perpetrator, God will not forgive the abuser; forgiveness is not wiping an offense from the memory of the abused; forgiveness is not removing all negative consequences from the picture; forgiveness is not automatically granting trust and reconciliation. Instead, there are judicial forgiveness, psychological forgiveness, and relational forgiveness. Judicial forgiveness is the complete and perfect removal of guilt of one's sin by God, and He alone. It is contingent upon confession, the acknowledgment of sin, and repentance. Although this is solely done by the Lord, others must not hinder the process by excusing offenders of their full ownership and defending the abuse. Psychological forgiveness is the inner act of remission by releasing hatred and personal revenge and extending grace to the offender. Tracy interestingly and profoundly states that resentment is a natural and proper response to wrong. It is morally appropriate because it is occasioned. Thus, resentment is warranted. Furthermore, anger is a healthy and an apt response to evil. In fact, victims *should* be angry at abusers, whose evildoing angers God. Tracy goes on to say that psychological forgiveness is entering into God's point of view and seeing the abuser as someone Christ died for. At the same time, resting in the truth that God will execute justice toward all evil. In other words, psychological forgiveness is letting go of *my* right to hurt the person who abused me for hurting me. Through this, the victim relinquishes his or her roles as the judge, jury, and executioner and surrendering those rightful roles to the Father. Hence, forgiveness is an act of

faith. Lastly, relational forgiveness is the restoration of relationship between the abused and abuser. The final goal and work of the triune God is to establish an eschatological community where His people have reconciled with Him and with one another. The writer encourages relational forgiveness when genuine repentance has occurred when the offender radically changes his or her mind and has turned away from a sinful way of life. Truly repentant abusers must take full responsibility for the abuse through confession, acknowledge the extensive damage, and enact new boundaries demonstrated by the victim, and take active steps to change the sinful patterns of behavior that led to the abuse. Repentance is not cheap and being sorry to be caught in the act of wrongdoing. Repentance is learning from mistakes, walking a mile in the shoes the one wounded, and feeling the pain that one caused in others and in oneself.

The sequence of practicing forgiveness varies after the first two steps are taken in order. First, sufferer should clarify the offense and the remaining residue of negative emotions. Assessing and clarifying the offenses is crucial because forgiveness can only happen in the light of a careful moral judgment. Doing so, it allows the victim to break the pattern of denial and misplaced blame. If not, remission will be superficial, inappropriate, and unhealthy, because sexual abuse victims protect themselves through denial, distortion, and dissociation. Secondly, check appropriate boundaries to check evil and stimulate repentance. Sexual abuse is inherently about the perpetrator's abuse of power to violate personal boundaries. The element of setting boundaries is preliminary to forgiveness, because though the act, the cycle of victimization and powerlessness can be broken. Third, deliberately, the victim should release the his or her right of hurting the male or the female and experience the reframing process and trauma resolution. This will be an act of faith as the victim will prayerfully turn over the need for justice and redress over

to God, the Just Judge. Fourthly, one should extend appropriate grace and revising emotions, which takes countless form and thus, cannot be formalized. The process of amnesty is long term and highly individualized. Identifying deep inner resentment, a sense of superiority over the offender, a too-ready demeanor to forgive, and a smugness are indicators of pseudo-forgiveness. Positive signs are shown in the ability to use anger constructively, increase in positive attitudes toward the offender, increase in capacity to give and receive love and to experience gratitude, and increase in the ability to ask for forgiveness from others.

I had four favorite quotes from the article: “forgiveness is not essential for healing,” (220) “forgiveness is letting go of my right to hurt another person for hurting me,” (222) “repentance is walking a mile in the shoes of the one we’ve wounded,” (225) and “the capacity to give and receive love and to experience gratitude; and an increase in the ability to ask for forgiveness from others [are positive clinical signs of genuine forgiveness].” (227) I had read multiple articles and studies during this assignment as well as previous to taking general psychology class, however, this has been so far, one of the best articles written for and to sexual abuse victims and perpetrators. It was easy to digest the information and the material was highly engaging for the readers. Additionally, Tracy was practical and relevant in his approach. I can offer psychological forgiveness even to unrepentant sexual offenders by letting go of personal attempts to exact revenge and extend grace and kindness instead. Relational forgiveness, on the other hand, should only be offered when the abuser has demonstrated a clear willingness to take responsibility for the abuse. I greatly appreciated his inclusion of other scholars, whom Tracy quoted numerous in the article. It lifted a great of pressure off for the victim when the writer claimed that judicial remission was from God, and I should only avoid hindering the process by

not admonishing premature relationship forgiveness. Overall, the article breathed hope of healing for abuse survivors and I hope if sexual abusers are reading the words, he or she will be drawn closer to repentance and redemption in Christ Jesus.

Work Cited

Tracy, S. R. (1999). Sexual Abuse and Forgiveness. *Journal of Psychology & Theology*, 27(3), 219–229. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0000993662&site=eds-live>