

NOTATIONES

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FORGIVING LIKE GOD? *SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE IDEA OF CONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS*

by J. Mark Beach

1. Introduction

THE PLACE OF repentance in forgiving others has received varied answers in recent literature treating forgiveness in the Christian life. Some authors are adamant in insisting that the injured party may not (and must not) forgive wrongdoers unless they repent of their wrongdoing. This means simply that without repentance forgiveness is *improperly bestowed* and that until repentance is expressed forgiveness is *properly withheld*. Conversely, upon repentance forgiveness may and must proceed. Moreover, it is sometimes argued that forgiveness coupled with repentance clears away all or most of the debris caused by the sin or sins in question and full reconciliation (most of the time) is the requisite step to follow—that is, if forgiveness has been genuinely granted.¹

The call to forgive others is certainly a biblically grounded admonition, for the apostle is clear: "... forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:13 NIV; cf. Eph. 4:32). No doubt, a list of other biblical and theological grounds for forgiving others would be easy to compose. The issue at hand, however, is not that we should practice forgiveness but what forms the ground or basis for forgiving others. Here opinions divide. Some insist that if our forgiveness is modeled after God's forgiveness, then repentance is the absolutely necessary condition in order for forgiveness to take place. Indeed, some refer to forgiveness as a transaction between two people, with the admission

1. Two examples of this view are Jay Adams, *From Forgiveness to Forgiving: Learning to Forgive One Another God's Way*. Foreword by Dr. D. James Kennedy (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 1994); and Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

of guilt (and requisite contrition) coming from the guilty party, whereupon the damaged party must forgive the offender.

That repentance is an important facet in the forgiveness equation should not be a matter of debate. The *function* of repentance in this equation, however, needs clarification. This essay aims to examine what that function might be. Indeed, it is doubtful that forgiveness can reach its pinnacle or most blessed outcome, namely restoration and reunion, without repentance. But, again, the matter at issue is the *function* of repentance in the work of forgiveness.

What follows comes in three parts. First, I will briefly sketch the case for conditional forgiveness by a recent proponent of this view. Second, I will offer a corrective to this approach, setting forth some theological observations regarding the role of faith and repentance in divine forgiveness, seeking to explain the nature of conditionality as it impacts this question and therefore the function of repentance in forgiveness, including an analysis of how we are forgiven in Jesus Christ. Last, I will offer a brief analysis of some scriptural texts that are often misinterpreted in support of an un-nuanced notion of conditional forgiveness. My summary conclusions will be presented at the end of this essay.

2. A Case for Conditional Forgiveness

In exploring the case for conditional forgiveness, our interest is not to impugn persons as such, but to test theological ideas, which in this case have serious pastoral implications and either foster grace and healthy Christian living or compromise both pastoral practice and the Christian life. Since the Bible bids us to forgive in a manner that is gracious and generous like God's forgiveness of sinners, it is natural to want to forgive like God.

Proponents of conditional forgiveness argue that inasmuch as God's forgiveness is conditional, so we too must insist on conditional forgiveness. The condition that must be met in order to be forgiven is repentance. The natural question we might ask is how can human forgiveness between fellow sinners be compared to God's forgiveness, the one who dwells in "unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16)? Comparisons must exist otherwise Scripture wouldn't teach us to forgive others as God has forgiven us. As we earlier noted, the apostle Paul bids us to forgive one another, "just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32, with similar words in Col. 3:13).

Since God forgives conditionally, it is argued, so our practice of forgiveness must also be conditional. Forgiveness must be withheld from the unrepentant, even as it must be granted to those who do repent. Jay Adams is an advocate of this view. Inasmuch as we must model our forgiveness after the divine pattern, he boldly advocates for

conditional forgiveness. Chapter Three of his book bears the title “Forgiveness Is Conditional.”²

Alongside Adams, Chris Brauns’ recent book, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, builds a case for conditional forgiveness. He, first, seeks to articulate what he believes to be the divine pattern of forgiveness. Divine forgiveness is defined as follows: “A commitment by the one true God to pardon graciously those who repent and believe so that they are reconciled to him, although this commitment does not eliminate all consequences.”³ God’s forgiveness, notes Brauns, is “gracious”; it is a “commitment”; and it is “conditional.” “Only those who repent and have saving faith are forgiven.”⁴ While there are many commendable features of Brauns’ book, including moving anecdotes and honest portraits of the trials of forgiveness, besides much wise counsel, nonetheless, his approach is marred and otherwise compromised by his reductionistic idea that forgiveness is a “transaction” and that repentance is one of two pivot points for that transaction to take place—the other being that the offended party offer forgiveness and, upon repentance, grant it to the repenting offender. Brauns view may not be reduced to, “no repentance, no forgiveness,” for more is involved in this transaction. But without repentance the transaction is impossible.

Since Brauns’ study is, in my judgment, a stronger book than Adams’s, we will limit our analysis to his work. Our aim is not to present all facets of Brauns’ study (which, again, has many valuable insights), but to limit ourselves to his case for conditional forgiveness, the condition at issue having to do with the repentance of the offender. It should be noted that I am not arguing that repentance is irrelevant to the forgiveness equation or that repentance isn’t important and beneficial for all parties involved. I will argue, however, that it is mistaken to make this an absolute claim and there are important exceptions to this normal pathway to forgiveness and reconciliation. I will also argue that Brauns’ view, which well represents the position of conditional forgiveness proponents, derails inasmuch as he fails to explore the nature of conditionality, even as he fails to observe the pivotal differences between divine and human forgiveness. In fact, the facile and naïve link that conditional forgiveness advocates construct between God’s forgiveness and ours cannot bear the weight they assign to it; and in fact they miss the point of comparison in the applicable biblical texts.

Brauns makes his case for conditional forgiveness first by quoting 1 John 1:9 (“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”). These words, to his mind, readily settle the matter. If we confess, if we repent, there-

2. Jay Adams, *From Forgiveness to Forgiving*.

3. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 51.

4. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 51.

upon God forgives and cleanses. “Make no mistake— ... God’s forgiveness is conditional.”⁵

As forgiveness is conditional for God, it is likewise conditional for human relationships. Yes, Brauns explains, “an attitude of grace and a willingness to forgive all people” is mandated; it is not an option, for we are commanded to love even our enemies. Thus we must have a loving and forgiving disposition toward all persons; yet, says Brauns, “*complete* forgiveness can only take place when there is repentance.”⁶ I have italicized the word “complete” in the phrase “complete forgiveness” because Brauns usually does *not* add such a qualifier to his idea of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not, as far as I can tell from his stated views, something partial or that has stages or degrees; rather, it is all or nothing. Forgiveness involves a free offer of grace—and it is received and actually bestowed through repentance. In fact, there can be *no forgiveness* unless there is repentance.

Brauns also ties the believer’s practice of forgiveness toward others with assurance of going to heaven. Here he quotes Matthew 6:14-15 (“*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*”). These words not only teach us about forgiveness, they articulate for us “the threat of eternal judgment or hell” if we do not forgive. Meanwhile, the practice of forgiveness must not be cheap or automatic; it must be “consistent with justice.”⁷

After these introductory remarks, Brauns moves on to a more thorough discussion of his staked out views.

Key for Brauns is that believers forgive in the way God forgives. Brauns writes: “*God expects believers to forgive others in the way that he forgives them.*”⁸ He quotes three scriptural texts, two of which we have seen before: Matthew 6:12b; Ephesians 4:32; and Colossians 3:13. We ask God to forgive us “as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Believers are commanded to be kind and tenderhearted to one another, “forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” And we are told to bear each other’s burdens, and if there is a complaint of one believer toward another, forgive each other, “as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”

This brings Brauns to the question: How does God forgive us? As noted above, Brauns defines forgiveness as having three key ingredients: it is *gracious*; it is a *commitment*; and it is *conditional*. It is gracious since forgiveness is undeserved; the offender is guilty and in the wrong. It is a commitment because the offended party is resolved not merely to offer forgiveness and then take it back, or to forgive on-

5. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 20.

6. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 20-21 (last quote, italics added).

7. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 22-23.

8. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 44.

ly to revisit the offense later. There is a commitment to forgive the offender upon repentance and never revisit the matter again. Last, it is conditional, for unless the wrongdoer confesses his or her wrongdoing, repenting of it and seeking forgiveness from the person they have wronged (owns the offense and turns from it), forgiveness may not and must not be granted.

Brauns notes that the gracious character of this gift does not mean it is “free.” He explains that forgiveness is by grace alone and that “salvation rests entirely on the unmerited favor of God.” Brauns is clear in pointing out that we are not forgiven by our works. This gift of grace has the high price of Jesus’ bearing the penalty for our sins. “[It] ... was purchased by the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁹

Brauns maintains, however, that this doesn’t mean forgiveness isn’t conditional. It is not only conditioned on Christ’s propitiatory sacrifice, it is also conditioned on the repentance and faith of the sinner. “God’s forgiveness is conditional. Only those who repent and believe are saved.”¹⁰ Parsing out the idea of conditionality here, Brauns maintains that divine forgiveness is a gracious gift, but it is a gift that must be opened. The gift is opened by believing in Jesus Christ. But there is more. To turn in faith to God, to turn to Christ for forgiveness, is also a turning away from our sin and that is called repentance. To trust in Christ for forgiveness is called faith or believing. Repentance and faith are both requisites to receive the forgiveness of sins—they are the hands that open the gift of forgiveness.¹¹ Brauns quotes Acts 20:21 from the NIV, where Paul says: “*I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.*”¹²

Brauns observes that God’s forgiveness is a divinely wrapped package offered as a gift, but it is a gift only opened in the way of repentance and faith.¹³ What is essential is that persons receive this gracious gift “by turning *from*” their sin “in repentance *to* Christ in faith.”¹⁴ God graciously pardons those who repent and believe. Under “Discussion Questions” Brauns asks “What is the relationship between faith and repentance?” He does not actually answer this important query in the chapter in view except to say that faith is a turning to God, repentance is a turning away from our sin. He directs readers to consider such texts as Ephesians 2:8, Romans 10:9-10, and John 3:16, besides the above mentioned passage, Acts 20:21. Interestingly, these other texts do not mention repentance as part of the forgiveness package. Ephesians 2:8 declares that we are saved by

9. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 46-47.

10. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 47.

11. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 47.

12. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 47.

13. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 47.

14. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 51-52.

faith, through grace, and this is not of ourselves. Romans 10:9-10 states that salvation is in the way of confessing Jesus as Lord and believing God raised him from the dead, a believing which is our righteousness and salvation. As for John 3:16, it too hinges salvation or everlasting life on believing in God's one and only Son; repentance is not in this equation. Brauns, however, maintains that even when certain texts of Scripture fail to mention repentance in tandem with faith as the condition upon which God forgives us, it is always implied that repentance is necessary, that it is part and parcel of faith, and therefore it is not significant that such texts fail to mention repentance explicitly.¹⁵

In the chapter that follows, Brauns next links what he regards as the divine pattern of forgiveness to how Christians may and must practice forgiveness as well. Specifically, he addresses how Christians should forgive interpersonally. We must, if we follow the divine pattern, forgive like God does. This means that we must be committed "to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability and to be reconciled to that person, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated."¹⁶ Thus, in order for believers to forgive like God Brauns composes a formula of forgiveness based off the definition he has earlier presented. "Forgiveness: A commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability and to be reconciled to that person, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated."¹⁷

Brauns observes that the words for forgiveness in Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13 are not the common word *aphiēmi* but the word *charizomai*, which is rooted in the word "grace." "To forgive" here has the idea of being gracious to one another. Brauns writes: "The gracious *offer* of forgiveness is unconditional. Christians should always have the disposition of grace toward those who offend them."¹⁸ He quotes Jesus's words on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), to show that Jesus *offered grace* to those who crucified him even before they were repentant.

Brauns maintains that Christian forgiveness must carry through the commitment of forgiveness to the *repentant*. That is, when the repentant offender is forgiven, then the offense no longer forms a barrier between the parties. It will never be mentioned again and will no longer hinder the personal relationship between the parties involved. Practically speaking, this means that when victims of violence forgive their *repentant* attackers, then the matter may no longer stand between them or hinder their personal relationships with one another. This is "conditional forgiveness," Brauns emphasizes, just as "God's

15. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 146.

16. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 55.

17. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 55.

18. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 55.

forgiveness is conditional.” The offer of grace is one thing; forgiveness is another. The latter is bestowed only on “those who repent and believe.” Brauns points readers to Luke 17:3-4, “*If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him....*” Brauns observes that repentance is a change in behavior, not just a feeling of being sorry; it is a change of “actions and attitude.” He asserts that forgiveness is both contingent on repentance and that upon repentance forgiveness is mandatory. In no wise is forgiveness “automatic.”¹⁹ He also returns to his wrapped package illustration. A tag on the package says to the offender: “To you, regardless of what you’ve done.” Inside that package is gracious forgiveness. *If* the offender chooses to open this package, the gift of forgiveness may be had.²⁰

What Brauns intends by likening forgiveness to a gift offered, waiting to be opened, is not that forgiveness is already transacted or accomplished or has been bestowed. Forgiveness is only being *offered*. Consequently, the illustration shows that forgiveness *may be* transacted and accomplished, and it *will be bestowed* when the offender comes in *repentance* and seeks forgiveness from the person wronged. There is no forgiveness without repentance, for without each party doing their part the transaction of forgiveness is stalled or otherwise derailed. In other words, for clarity, Brauns does not suggest that forgiveness is actually bestowed as a gift—regardless of whether it is received. Rather, it is offered, it is available, but it *is not granted or given until* repentance meets the condition required.

The *offer* of forgiveness is unconditional—an offer motivated by love. Love, then, makes one disposed to forgive. Love motivates the “gracious *offer*” of forgiveness unconditionally. “Christians should always have a disposition of grace toward those who offend them.” Brauns offers no analysis of how one travels the road of pain, from resentment (maybe even hatred toward the offender) to possessing a disposition of kindness and love toward him or her. Nor does he explore the obstacles and burdens that pock-mark that road in journeying toward a disposition to forgive. He simply asserts that we must have love for persons who have sinned against us; and if they repent, we must forgive them. Offended persons, then, need love if they are to forgive their offenders. This love is unconditional toward the wrongdoer; but love is a condition that must be found in the believer who has been wronged and is under the biblical command to forgive others. Having unconditional love to offer forgiveness is followed by a clear condition if an offender is to be given forgiveness, namely repentance. *To offer* forgiveness is unconditional; *to grant* forgiveness is conditional.

19. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 57.

20. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 57-58. Below we will examine whether Brauns has properly understood the grammatical meaning of this “*if clause*.”

Brauns sharply criticizes what he calls a therapeutic model of forgiveness because he believes that perspective fails to insist on the absolute necessity of repentance as a condition for forgiveness.²¹ The worry is that forgiveness become subjective, individualistic, and privatized, a form of self-healing without a concern to help the offender own their offense. Self-interest, then, displaces love for neighbor and love for God. Worse, forgiveness is conceived as taking place in the privacy of one's own "feelings" without regard for justice. Forgiveness can be bestowed on those who have committed no offense and are guilty of nothing. Last, forgiveness doesn't need to issue forth in reconciliation. For Brauns, forgiveness requires confrontation between the two parties; there must be an admission of guilt and sincere repentance for forgiveness to be transacted. Justice demands that guilt be acknowledged. Usually, ideally, full reconciliation and fellowship ensues as proof and fruit of genuine forgiveness. According to Brauns' portrait, therapeutic forgiveness mandates "automatic" forgiveness, no matter the crime or atrocity—like the gang rape of a mother followed by the decapitation of her nursing infant.²² Brauns alleges that therapeutic forgiveness means the grieving mother, brutalized by violence, must automatically forgive her rapist and the murderer of her child (for her own sake); whereas Brauns counsels that she must *offer* forgiveness, from a disposition of *love for* the brute (more for his sake).

In Chapter Twelve, entitled "How Should I Respond to the Unrepentant? A Third Principle," Brauns seeks to fill out his discussion on *conditional* forgiveness. The topic is important since not all offenders admit their misdeeds and some offenders glory in their misdeeds. Either way, their repentance is not forthcoming, even after being confronted with their wrongdoing.

So how should we handle those who refuse to repent? Brauns counsels against personal vengeance. He offers three principles. The first principle is this: "Resolve not to take vengeance." Vengeance belongs to God. The second principle is "Proactively show love." We must do good to our enemies. We are not to live by the code of an eye for an eye. "Revenge is never an option." These are biblical standards which apply to our enemies (even unrepenting enemies).²³ This

21. See Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, Chapter Five, "More Than a Feeling." This model (as described by Brauns) reduces forgiveness to a *feeling*; individualizes forgiveness (as something that happens in your own heart and mind without regard to the guilty party); renders forgiveness unconditional, granting it to offenders whether they are repentant or not; makes self-interest the pivotal motivator for forgiveness (to forgive another is for one's own benefit); further, it mutes or compromises the standard of justice, so that one may forgive another where there is in fact no offense; and, last, therapeutic forgiveness happens apart from reconciliation. We must forego addressing this issue given the scope and focus of this essay.

22. See Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 69-72.

23. Brauns sets out these principles in the chapter previous to this one, Chapter Eleven, "How Should I Respond to the Unrepentant: Two Principles," 129-39.

brings Brauns to his third principle: "Don't forgive the unrepentant, but leave room for the wrath of God."²⁴

Brauns maintains that forgiveness is for the repentant. As for the unrepentant, vengeance belongs to God; leave such persons to divine wrath (see Rom. 12:19; Deut. 32:35, 43). That is, trust God to accomplish justice toward them in the time and manner he chooses.²⁵ Forgiveness is withheld until repentance is forthcoming. Assuming that repentance is most unlikely to occur, give them over to divine justice. Among other things, this means that it is wrong to forgive the unrepentant. Brauns is again concerned to stave off the mistaken and unbiblical notion of "automatic forgiveness" and "cheap grace."

In this connection he considers a possible objection to his view, namely, Jesus's prayer from the cross, petitioning the Father to forgive those who were crucifying him (Luke 23:34). Brauns argues that this is a prayer for future forgiveness. Of course, had those who crucified him been repentant, Jesus "could have forgiven them on the spot." But Jesus's prayer is not literally a petition for the Father to forgive such persons in the immediate present. Similarly, Stephen's prayer at his martyrdom ("*Lord, do not hold this sin against them,*" Acts 7:60) is a prayer for future forgiveness, applicable for example to Saul of Tarsus, who consented to the stoning of Stephen, but later found forgiveness when he repented on his way to Damascus.²⁶

As noted earlier, even when repentance is not explicitly mentioned in connection with forgiveness (Matt. 6:12, 14-15; 18:21-22) it is implicitly present and presupposed. Thus, Brauns once more reiterates his principal point, "Forgiveness is conditional." He appeals to John Murray to bolster this point. Murray clearly states that forgiveness is performed upon the meeting of specific conditions, being "administered on the repentance of the person who is to be forgiven."²⁷

24. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 142.

25. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 142-43.

26. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 145-48.

27. Quoted from Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 146. See Murray's *Collected Writings*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 191. Murray is treating Luke 17:4 and explains in handling this text that we are under duty, when others truly offend us, not only to be ready to forgive them, but also to reprove such offenders. Having done so, if such offenders repent, we have brought them to the right state of mind, and so we forgive, having reproved them, and "enter again upon relations of peace and harmony." Murray also explains that forgiveness is not overlooking transgression or simply having a forgiving spirit or a readiness to forgive. Rather, it is "a definite act performed by us on the fulfillment of certain conditions." While, given this text, it may be fitting that Murray expresses himself this way in a sermon, it is another matter whether these remarks categorically define all that Murray might wish to say on the complex topic of forgiveness or how he might wish to parse out the idea of "condition." The same observation applies to Appendix Two of Brauns's book where he offers quotation snippets from a variety of evangelical authors in order to buttress his case for conditional forgiveness. Should all or some of these authors actually agree

Brauns further explains that what is *unconditional* in the forgiveness equation is the *offer* or *availability* of forgiveness, not forgiveness itself. We offer forgiveness *unconditionally*; we forgive *conditionally*. In sum, Brauns offers these instructions for those who must deal with unrepentant wrongdoers (as he understands Romans 12:17-21 to apply):

(1) Resolve not to take revenge. Do not even allow yourself to rehearse it in your mind. (2) Lovingly and proactively offer grace to your enemies. Although love and grace are undeserved, creatively consider what you might do to live at peace with all people, even those who may have murdered your own family. (3) Do not forgive the unrepentant. Leave room for the wrath of God. He will deal justly with all wrongs. When we consider that those who do not know Christ will spend eternity in an everlasting hell, we can move beyond bitterness to compassion, even in the most awful circumstances.²⁸

In closing out our sketch of Brauns' case for conditional forgiveness, grounded in what he believes to be the practice of forgiveness like God forgives, he offers a chapter that instructs us on how to defeat or hold back bitterness. Brauns' concern is again to set conditional forgiveness in contrast to "automatic forgiveness." Brauns urges us to avoid bitterness "like the bubonic plague."²⁹

3. A Corrective to the Conditional Forgiveness View

We have used Brauns as a recent advocate of the conditional forgiveness model in order to present the features and forms of argument that are typical for this approach. Our interest in this question, however, is not limited to a single author, and it certainly is not our interest to dissect a single author's views in order to subject them to criticism. In offering a corrective to the conditional forgiveness view, our criticisms will be directed to the ideas that presuppose and drive this model.

3.1. Questions Exposing a Problem

As earlier observed, conditional forgiveness proponents sometimes argue that this view answers to the idea of justice written on our hearts.³⁰ Only when a person repents, owns their guilt, is justice sat-

with Brauns in *his construal* of conditional forgiveness, however, they too come under the same censure offered below.

28. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 151.

29. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 153.

30. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 65.

isfied. Thus, the condition that seems to be met by insisting that persons must repent if they are to be forgiven is the condition of justice—the justice of the penalty they deserve. Repentance, then, in some way serves justice. Once again, the question is the function of repentance in forgiveness. Does repentance, with due contrition, serve as a kind of good work that meets a justice standard enabling forgiveness to proceed *justly*? If it is unjust to forgive the unrepentant, does repentance meet some claim of justice? If so, how does this relate to the way God forgives us? Does our repentance answer a standard of justice that Christ’s work hasn’t met?

These are pivotal questions, of course. If repentance, which involves an acknowledgment of guilt and blameworthiness, coupled with remorse or regret for having wronged another person, effects the bestowal and transaction of forgiveness, is repentance some sort of meritorious work in the forgiveness project? Even if we leave aside the question of merit at this point, what is repentance, with contrition, doing? For that matter, what is the standard of repentance, judged by whom? In other words, how much repentance, with its attending contrition, is necessary? To what degree? For what duration? To whose satisfaction? What if the offender’s repentance seems a bit shallow to the person offended, not sincere enough, or perfunctory? Does the offer of forgiveness still stand without being transacted? Do the parties agree to disagree at this point? What if the offended party is overly sensitive, expecting more from the offender than the wrong committed requires? Or, does the offended party get to act sovereignly over this circumstance, dictating the terms of repentance to the offender no matter what? If so, what has become of justice now? These are difficult issues, and they serve to demonstrate that the offender’s repentance is a flimsy ground on which to base forgiveness. Or, another way of stating the problem: to make the wrongdoer’s repentance *a key pillar* in the scheme of divine forgiveness renders salvation precarious, for who can be repentant enough—often enough, deep enough, honest enough, and adequate enough—to meet any standard of divine justice? This approach makes the gracious and loving offer of forgiveness to rest on very unstable and wobbly ground, namely the wrongdoer’s repentance.

3.2. The Nature of Conversion

In this connection it is appropriate to take a step back and inquire into the biblical words translated as “repentance.” In English “to repent” means “to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one’s life,” coupled with the idea of feeling “regret or contrition.” It involves a change of mind and a feeling of sorrow. In back of the English word for repentance is the Latin term *repentir* from *re-poenitēre*, from *re-* + *poenitēre* = to feel regret (penitent). The key New Testament terms that are translated as “repentance” or “to repent”

are *metanoia* and *metanoēō*. The word is composed of *meta* + *nous*, and *nous* is related to the verb *ginōskō* = to know. Thus, the term has the idea of “to know after” or “after-knowledge,” meaning a change of mind as a result of after-knowledge, and in that sense to regret the earlier action and desire to remedy it. Immediately it is clear that the key biblical term has a different accent and connotation than the Latin term. The biblical term accents a change of mind, with regret, whereas the Latin emphasizes the emotional side or the feeling of regret. It is not wrong, however, to argue that the word *metanoia* involves the whole person, centering on our intellectual side, but including our volition and emotions or feelings. It clearly indicates a conscious disapproval of a former action, involving a change of heart.³¹ This is the word we find when John the Baptist commenced his work: “Repent (*metanoēō*), for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2).

Another New Testament word for repentance is *epistrophe* (*epistrephō*). This word emphasizes the idea of “turning again” or “to turn back.” The noun is used only once and the verbal form several times. It emphasizes the idea of a total re-direction of one’s life. Acts 3:19 brings the former term (*metanoia*) and this one together, so that we are exhorted to repent or change our mind (*metanoēō*) and to turn back (*epistrephō*) to God, which issues forth in the blotting out of our sins. “To convert” plays into this word. One other term connoting repentance, is the word *metameleia* (*metamelomai*). It occurs five times in the New Testament and has the idea of “to care afterwards,” i.e., to experience remorse. The emotional dimension of repentance is accented by this word; as such, it is closer to the Latin word *poenitentia*.

We see, then, that repentance, biblically speaking, is about conversion. It is a change of mind, a change of the direction of one’s life and behavior, coupled with a godly remorse or sorrow for former actions and pursuits. There is a turnaround—from sin to God. Louis Berkhof offers this analysis:

True conversion is born of godly sorrow, and issues in a life of devotion to God, II Cor. 7:10. It is a change that is rooted in the work of regeneration, and that is effected in the conscious life of the sinner by the Spirit of God; a change of thoughts and opinions, of desires and volitions, which involves the conviction that the former direction of life was unwise and wrong and alters the entire course of life. There are two sides to this conversion, the one active and the other passive; the former being the act of God, by which He changes the conscious

31. See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, revised 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 481. Also see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, trans. John Friend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 132-75.

course of man's life, and the latter, the result of this action as seen in man's changing his course of life and turning to God. Consequently, a twofold definition must be given of conversion: (a) Active conversion is *that act of God whereby He causes the regenerated sinner, in His conscious life, to turn to Him in repentance and faith.* (b) Passive conversion is *the resulting conscious act of the regenerated sinner whereby he, through the grace of God, turns to God in repentance and faith.*³²

From this sketch of the biblical terms related to repentance, along with this theological analysis of conversion—conversion being the centerpiece of the biblical words—we discover that an offending sinner repenting to the offended God is itself a work of divine grace. In back of our repentance before God is his prior gracious work of rebirth, and from there the Holy Spirit is also the author of our conversion—bringing us to faith and repentance. Consequently, our repentance is not our achievement; it is a fruit of divine grace, and therefore the credit for our coming to repentance belongs to God. Yet, the Holy Spirit in working conversion in us also engages our own intellectual, volitional, and emotional life in this operation. That is, we are consciously engaged in turning to God by his grace, and so turning away from our sins as well. As a work of God, repentance merits nothing and is, in fact, a fruit of Christ's redemptive work for us. This means that repentance is, at best, a condition of consequence regarding forgiveness, not a necessary condition, not strictly a prerequisite for forgiveness. Repentance is a fruit of Christ's work for us and a fruit of faith. It is not our contribution to divine pardon. Therefore, Christ's atoning work for our salvation—his work for our rebirth, faith, justification, pardon, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification—includes all his benefits to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. It includes, that is, our conversion, which is nothing less than our faith and repentance.

One of the difficulties of an un-nuanced approach advocating conditional repentance is that it doesn't explain why the availability or *offer* of forgiveness is free but *forgiveness itself* (the bestowal of forgiveness) isn't. There is a price to pay to be forgiven, and that price is repentance. But why is *loving* our offending neighbor free but *forgiving* our offending neighbor at a price? Conditional forgiveness advocates do not show us how the offense and guilt caused by the wrongdoing demands love and grace except that it is freely given love and grace (like God's), while forgiveness (the actual bestowal of forgiveness), requires the admittance ticket of repentance. Forgiveness isn't freely *given*, for it requires something that isn't free—namely, repentance. Indeed, to argue for conditional forgiveness requires that one carefully parse out the condition of repentance.

32. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 483.

3.3. The Nature of Conditionality in Conditional Repentance

So, what are we to make of this condition? Is repentance a good work, a piece of Protestant penance? Is it a form of *suffering* that needs to be suffered as a supplement to Christ's suffering? Does it render the offending party forgivable? Are we to believe that the repenting (and now *mildly sanctified*) sinner has become the forgivable sinner? If the offending party is lovable without repentance, why isn't the offending party forgivable without repentance? Proponents of conditional forgiveness fail to explain what role repentance performs in the forgiveness equation. Yes, they typically say that it opens the package *offering* forgiveness. But it is clear that the giver of the forgiveness gift isn't actually *giving the gift until it is opened by repentance*. It may be likened to a father putting a present on the table for his son's birthday (say, a new baseball glove), but the gift isn't actually given until the boy says he is sorry for teasing his sister. The gift isn't *given* until the son repents. The gift isn't free; it requires the son to become different—the boy must contribute his part; he must become more forgivable and gift-worthy. Till he does, the gift is in view but not given. It is repentance that *effects* the genuine handing over of the gift, the genuine "it's yours." I'll lovingly do something if you'll humbly do something. There is a bit of tit-for-tat in this scenario, a *quid pro quo*. Does this model fit divine forgiveness? Is this what conditionality means in conditional forgiveness?

Conditionality in the work of forgiveness needs to be analyzed with care, for there is a conditionality that is passive, instrumental, and consequential; and there is a conditionality that is active, necessary, and causative. The latter senses of conditionality, forming the model of conditional forgiveness, cannot fit the biblical portrait or a proper theological doctrine of salvation which is according to grace alone. The former senses of conditionality, however, are defensible, when rightly circumscribed. For example, we may speak of the instrumentality of faith in the doctrine of justification *by faith alone*, meaning that faith receives the righteousness of Christ in the way of imputation (that passively), and in no sense functions as the active cause, nor does it ground the atoning work of Christ for our salvation. Similarly, we may speak of repentance as being passive and receptive to the bestowal of forgiveness, being enabled by divine grace and the forgiveness achieved for us, depending on the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit to bring us to acknowledge ourselves as sinners. Repentance needs and wants the forgiveness wrought for us. This is a conditionality that in no way grounds forgiveness, transacts it, or makes forgiveness dependent upon the human party vis-à-vis God's forgiving sinners; but it is a consequential condition, coming about because of God's prior initiative and working of grace in us. Thus, repentance, at best, is an instrument that receives the gift of forgiveness already given, not the cause of forgiveness being enacted.

Conditional forgiveness proponents, though, appear to reject the above sketched instrumental sense of conditionality. They reject this instrumental view and instead argue for a transactional model, making repentance an active and necessary condition (thus a causative condition) for forgiveness to take place. In short, they make repentance an *active, necessary, and causative condition* for God to forgive sinners and for us to forgive fellow sinners.

A necessary condition states that “a condition *X* is necessary for condition *Y* if whenever *X* does not occur, then *Y* does not occur.” Oxygen, for example, is a necessary condition for the occurrence of fire; if oxygen is not present then there can be no fire. In the absence of the condition being present, a specific event or happening cannot take place. Repentance, then, is a necessary condition for the bestowal of actual forgiveness. In the absence of the condition, repentance, being present, then forgiveness does not occur. This isn’t to say that, for conditional forgiveness supporters, repentance is sufficient by itself, that it is the only necessary condition for forgiveness to be bestowed; but it is to say that it is *a* necessary condition; and on those terms it is a *conditio sine qua non* (“a condition without which nothing”). It has a causative function.

If we tease this out a bit we detect the miscue. If these advocates made the point that the gift of forgiveness is *received* in the way of repentance instead of *given* through repentance, they would be much closer to a biblical portrait. But that is not their view, for they argue that the gift is received *only when it is bestowed*, and repentance makes that happen (an active, necessary, and causative condition). Forgiveness is *not actually given* but *only offered* until repentance is forthcoming. If they said, the gift belongs to the offender, forgiveness is bestowed, and the way this person can take up the gift personally and enjoy it, is in the way of repentance, again, they would be much closer to the biblical portrait. They however are usually emphatic in insisting that there is *no giving* of forgiveness (as in *bestowing* it on another) until there is a *required attribute manifest* in the offending party, *repentance*.

Inasmuch as conditional forgiveness devotees think their view fits the way God forgives sinners, they have compromised the biblical doctrine of salvation, for they misconstrue how repentance functions in God’s pardoning of sinners. Their view has the aroma of a Protestant penance—now that you have this trait (repentance, godly sorrow, amendment of life), God can *bestow* forgiveness. For these persons, repentance is *first* about *enacting the bestowal* of forgiveness (that is, forgiveness is *enabled* to be bestowed by repentance), only secondarily about receiving. After all, you can’t receive what isn’t first bestowed. That, in short form, is what can be judged as their misstep.

Of course, they believe they are on target in this construal of God’s forgiveness from passages like 1 John 1:9; Luke 17:4; Matthew

6:12, 14-15; 18:21, and others. On the surface it may seem that conditional forgiveness proponents have captured what is meant by: *Because you forgive your debtors, God will forgive you*. This construal of Jesus's words says that our forgiving others causes God to forgive us or forms the ground for his forgiveness or catalyzes God forgiving us. "If that were the case, however, God's forgiveness would not be a gift but a payment. Or if it were a gift, it would be the kind of gift only God can give—a gift that hasn't been elicited by a prior gift"—namely Christ's sacrifice for us. "In either case, we would not receive forgiveness by faith; we would earn it or draw it out by our own forgiveness of others. But that can't be right. It undercuts the idea that God is a giver."³³ In fact, that view undercuts the gospel itself; it undermines the entire Protestant Reformation—grace alone and faith alone must give way to grace plus good works. On that view we are no longer justified by faith alone, but by faith together with works of love, i.e., our forgiveness of others. Calvin is clear in maintaining that the petition of the Lord's Prayer, wherein we ask divine forgiveness "as we forgive" or "have forgiven" our debtors, does not form a condition such that the pardon we seek "depends on that which we grant to others." Instead, the "as we forgive" urges us "to put aside all injuries, and at the same time to have us confirm our own absolution, as by the imprint of a seal."³⁴ The conditionality is not a *causal conditionality*. "[I]t was not Christ's intention to indicate a cause, but only to tell us the attitude we should have towards our brothers in the process of desiring to be reconciled with God." Echoing remarks we have noted earlier regarding the need to move from anger, hatred, and bitterness to a disposition of love and grace, Calvin adds: "If the Spirit of God reigns in our hearts, then all ill-will and feelings of revenge must go. As we have the Spirit as the witness of our adoption, we see that this indication is simply put here to differentiate the sons of God from the outsiders."³⁵

To offer a brief theological analysis of this topic it must be observed that the effort to make forgiveness hang on the offender's repentance cannot track with the manner in which God forgives us. This is the case for at least three reasons. First, our salvation does not depend on the degree, depth, sincerity, scope, and insight of our penitence, as if our salvation depends on "this good work," this contribution of ours to the attaining of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Reformed writers have never conceived of human repentance as co-

33. Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 155.

34. John Calvin, *Commentaries of John Calvin*. 46 vols (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-55; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979) (hereafter cited CTS); idem, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963-1974) (hereafter cited CNTC). Comm. Matt. 6:12, (CNTC) 212.

35. Calvin, Comm. Matt. 6:12, (CNTC) 212.

instrumental with faith, or as some other sort of condition by which we attain Christ and salvation through him. While repentance attends faith, it most certainly is not co-instrumental with faith. For repentance is easily detached from or can exist without faith. Repentance does not depend on Christ as Savior. Repentance does not look for salvation outside of oneself as such. Looking to Christ is the work of faith and directs repentance to him. Moreover, repentance and the sorrow that accompanies it is not what makes faith faith! Faith doesn't qualify as *faith* because of repentance or love or any other "good work." Faith—the instrument by which we attain Christ—cannot bring with it "good works" for attaining Christ—not even non-meritorious good works (those are the only kind we have, in any case). Whence would such "good works" derive? How does one receive "good works" of faith, of repentance, of love apart from Christ? If this were possible, then we would attain Christ through the good works of faith itself or attendant repentance, and all that *apart from Christ*. Consequently, it is quite mistaken to posit repentance as the condition for receiving God's forgiveness.³⁶ *Sola fide* repudiates this notion.

Second, to make repentance some sort of *conditio sine qua non*—and that is what the supporters of conditional forgiveness advocate—is to make Christ's work of atonement and the Holy Spirit's work of calling, rebirth, and bestowal of faith dependent upon the sinner's sanctification. This, then, is to make justification dependent upon sanctification. It is surprising that evangelical and Reformed Protestants are falling into such fundamental error, for at the very least one would expect them to circumscribe the language of conditionality with great care. Sadly, this expectation is not met.

As noted above, the idea of conditions can be understood in various ways. To their credit, conditional forgiveness believers are usually not arguing that repentance forms the *sufficient cause* of forgiveness—i.e., they are not saying that repentance in itself is sufficient to produce the outcome of forgiveness. Instead, they appear to argue that repentance is a *necessary cause* for forgiveness to obtain. Thus, while other causes or conditions are also necessary, and some may even be prior to and more important than repentance, nonetheless repentance remains a hinge upon which the door of forgiveness

36. This very point is argued in article 24 of the Belgic Confession. This article also specifically rebuts the error of formulating justification by a faith preloaded with so-called non-meritorious good works. There is no other kind of good works performed by sinners than non-meritorious good works—all our works must be sanctified by God's grace (see art. 24). Such works, then, do not qualify faith as faith. If they did, then good works make faith faith, which is absurd. Repentance cannot be that which makes the sinner worthy of forgiveness. This smacks of works righteousness, for it means that God forgives those who make themselves forgivable by their penitence. A form of sanctification and a fruit of faith become part of the grounds for justification and forgiveness.

swings. Without it, there is no forgiveness. Repentance is a *necessary* and *contributory cause*—among others—for receiving forgiveness.

Third, to make repentance the condition for receiving divine forgiveness casts sinners back upon themselves. Are you penitent enough? Is it sincere and contrite enough? Is it pure or still tinged with impure desire or excuse? Have you repented of all your sins? Are you aware of all your sins, in all their depth? Is your repentance commensurate with the scope, degree, number, and gravity of your sins? Or are you partially forgiven in God's sight, for this sin but not for that one, etc.? To make repentance the condition for divine forgiveness is to reintroduce Roman Catholic thinking into the doctrine of justification, confusing or melding justification with sanctification. The faith alone of the Reformation gives way to faith plus repentance, which is the same as saying Christ plus repentance, which is not different from saying Christ with our penitence. Repentance counts! Our repentance—even if wrought in us by the Holy Spirit—forms the ground either for receiving Christ for salvation or for moving God to grant to us the forgiveness Christ has wrought for us. The former abandons “faith alone” and the latter forfeits “Christ alone.” Either way, this view is quite unReformed and unbiblical at the root.

In that light, therefore, it is important that we eschew any notion that human repentance *enables divine forgiveness*, as if some attribute in sinners, namely repentance, renders God's forgiveness *able to be given* or *granted* to them. There is nothing in us, including our repentance, that moves God to forgive us or that makes forgiveness suitable for us, or enables God to do what he otherwise cannot do (as if our repentance satisfies divine justice in some way—isn't Christ's work on the cross alone sufficient for that?). On the contrary, God has already done everything for us—and that according to his grace. So what does repentance actually do?

3.4. What Is the Function of Repentance in Forgiveness?

In answering the question of what repentance does or how it functions in the work of forgiveness, we need to see first and foremost that repentance is about truth. Our repentance declares to God and to ourselves that we are guilty, and that God's justice is rightly aimed against us as worthy of his wrath and displeasure. In repentance (the offender repenting) the wrongdoing is named as wrong and condemned as wrong by the offender. This truth is the fundamental role played by repentance. But there is more. Coupled with this idea (and following the import of the biblical words for repentance) is that the guilty party expresses remorse for the wrong. Some criminals admit their crime as evil and wicked but are not sorry for it and would gladly do it again. Repentance isn't only an acknowledgment of wrong but regret or remorse, contrition, for the wrong done. Thus, repentance involves a personal assessment of oneself and a desire to change

oneself and what was done. There is therefore a desire to rectify or change or turn around and live in the opposite direction of one's misdeeds, to cease and desist doing the wrong. Our repentance declares the truth about our being in the wrong. It expresses the truth that we wish we had not done it, and in seeking forgiveness wishes to remedy former actions or behavior. With all that, it also seeks release from debt and the penalty due that debt. Repentance, then, with respect to God, catches up to the reality of what forgiveness grants. For God's forgiveness deals with our wrongdoing not by administering justice but by suffering the injustice, not counting our wrong against us. There is a release from genuine debt. Similarly, in forgiveness, we grant what is not due, namely release from the debt created by the offender's misdeed.

We should make no mistake, however, if repentance includes both the truth about the offender's acknowledgment of wrongdoing, regret for it, a wish to undo it, and a desire to be forgiven, i.e., to be released from the debt owed, then repentance (if it is to be more than regret) requires an awareness of a forgiveness to be had. As Calvin observes, "The beginning of repentance is a sense of God's mercy." He explains it this way: "When men are persuaded that God is ready to give pardon, they begin to gather courage to repent; otherwise perverseness will ever increase in them ... they will never return to the Lord."³⁷

Forgiveness, we must remember, does not mean the offended party ignores or pretends he or she was not wronged. Forgiveness means declaring the offender guilty, to be in the wrong; and it means not counting the wrong against the wrongdoer. If we fail to uphold each part of this in forgiveness, error is inevitable. For if we fail to declare the offender guilty, we might accuse but not condemn. Or if we still count the wrong against the wrongdoer, even after their repentance, that isn't forgiveness by any definition, for we are still holding the offender accountable. "To forgive means to accuse the offenders in the larger act of not counting their offenses against them."³⁸ This understanding of forgiveness does not depend upon the recipient having certain requisite attributes that enable us to bestow forgiveness. However, this understanding of forgiveness shows us how forgiveness can be *received*.

As Miroslav Volf explains: To receive forgiveness "means to receive *both* the accusation and the release from the debt." We receive the release from debt by believing God's mercy to us in Christ. We receive the accusation by confessing our guilt and repenting of our wrongdoing. "By confessing, I recognize myself as the one who needs for-

37. Calvin, Comm. Hosea 6:1, (CTS) 215. This is a valuable insight; also see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (one volume edition), trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson Publishers, 2008), III.ii.7, 12, 29.

38. Volf, *Free of Charge*, 153.

giveness and who can appropriately receive it. By failing to confess, I declare that I am in no need of forgiveness. To me, in that case, forgiveness isn't a gift; it's an insult, a declaration that I've done the wrong I claim not to have done."³⁹ When we acknowledge and accept that we are guilty of wrongdoing, we confess and repent as a declaration of what is true about us. To refuse to repent is to refuse forgiveness; it is to refuse to receive what is already yours. It is to reject grace, either because I cannot or will not believe that the grace of forgiveness is truly given; or because I refuse to own my offense and confess it as wrong.

God doesn't wait for us to repent before he forgives; rather, because he forgives we are enabled to repent. We see, then, that saying this we have not at all shortchanged repentance or rendered it unimportant. We maintain that repentance is essential *for the reception of forgiveness*. If you are guilty, you receive forgiveness by repenting. But it is important that we disown the notion that repentance actually becomes the ground, condition, as in some sense our earning the right, to be forgiven, or making God reactive—we repent and then God forgives. This turns the entire Protestant Reformation, the gospel itself, on its head. Forgiveness is not conditioned by prior repentance. God forgives us before we repent. His love sprints out in front us, prepares and accomplishes redemption, gives us the gift of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit—for everything we have is a gift of God—prior to any repentance from us. God even gives us the gift of repentance so that we can own the truth about ourselves and our sins, about our guilt and the penalty that is our due, so that we can own the gospel of grace as for us. For, indeed, no one repents, no one seeks mercy, unless mercy is available to be had.

It is interesting to note that in his book on forgiveness, Miroslav Volf offers an illustration of forgiveness quite similar to the one used by conditional forgiveness advocates as well, namely likening forgiveness to "a gift." But Volf's illustration comes with telling differences. He bids the reader to imagine sending your sister an expensive gift through the mail, a diamond bracelet. You tell her to expect it, and what it is. She hesitates to accept it. Maybe she doesn't want to feel obligated to you. Maybe she is embarrassed by its cost. Maybe she feels you can't afford it. Whatever the case may be, she leaves the packaged unopened.

Have you given her a gift? Yes and no, says Volf. Yes, you bought it, sent it, and it was delivered to her home—yet, No. Although the gift is in her home it is unopened; she has not yet decided to accept it. *In that sense*, she hasn't yet *received* it. "Given but not received, the gift is stuck somewhere in the middle" between you and her. "Forgiveness works the same way."⁴⁰

39. Volf, *Free of Charge*, 153.

40. Volf, *Free of Charge*, 182.

Consider, then, God's forgiveness. The apostle Paul writes, "But God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

God's gift was given, it was sent. But that's not enough. We need to receive it. We receive the gift by trusting that God has indeed forgiven us and by accepting both the accusation contained in forgiveness and the release from guilt and punishment. We believe and confess the wrong we've done. Without faith and repentance, we are not forgiven—God having done the forgiving notwithstanding. God has given, but we haven't received.⁴¹

Forgiveness waits its reception. Volf's words demonstrate that repentance isn't irrelevant nor can it be ignored, but neither may we construe repentance as making us worthy for the bestowal of forgiveness. It certainly isn't Protestant penance. He offers this further explanation.

Repentance is important, even indispensable, and it is indispensable because forgiveness is an event *between* people, not just an individual's change of feelings, attitudes, or actions. Instead of being a *condition* of forgiveness, however, repentance is its necessary *consequence*.

If they imitate the forgiving God, forgivers will keep forgiving, whether the offenders repent or not. Forgivers' forgiving is not conditioned by repentance. The offenders' *being forgiven*, however, is conditioned by repentance—just as being given a box of chocolate is conditioned by receiving that box of chocolate. Without repentance, the forgivers will keep forgiving but the offenders will remain unforgiven, in that they are untouched by that forgiveness.

Why? Because they *refuse* to be forgiven. To forgive ... is to condemn the doer and the deed—or rather, it is to condemn in the process of releasing a person from the guilt and punishment that justice would demand. Correlatively, to repent is to accept the condemnation. Not to repent is to reject the condemnation. Unrepentant offenders implicitly say: It's wrong for you to forgive me; I've done you no wrong. Or more brazenly, they say: I don't care if you forgive or not, because I don't care whether I've wronged you or not. Mostly, however, they say: I am too ashamed of the wrongdoing I've committed to repent, too afraid of the consequences that may befall me. In all three cases, forgiveness is rejected. In the first case, it is

41. Volf, *Free of Charge*, 182-83.

construed as a false accusation; in the second case, it is despised, and in the third case it is deemed unbearable.⁴²

So repentance is essential *for the reception of forgiveness*. If you are guilty, you receive forgiveness by repenting. This is conditionality understood in a passive, receptive, and consequential sense. Moreover, in the case of God forgiving us, it is a condition that he himself meets in us and for us by bringing us to repentance. Repentance is what we do but only because God is working in us to will and to do (Phil. 2:13). Well, aren't conditional forgiveness proponents saying this, too? No. Although they may occasionally speak in this manner, for them repentance isn't merely the reception of a gift given, it is the act that transforms the *offer* of forgiveness into *the giving of forgiveness*. This is why it is labeled, aptly, *conditional* forgiveness. It isn't merely *receiving a gift given*; rather, repentance transforms an offer of grace to be given into grace actually given. By contrast, for Volf, there is forgiveness given; and the wrongdoer receives the gift in repentance. For proponents of conditional forgiveness, there is *an offer* of forgiveness; and the wrongdoer's repentance transforms the offer into a gift bestowed. This is not a small point, especially when one contemplates how God forgives sinners. Following the conditional forgiveness program, *the offer* of God's forgiving grace is free of charge; but *the bestowal* of such grace requires your contribution. God can't bestow forgiveness without your repentance—and, without your repentance you are not forgiven.

Whether the writers who follow this line of thinking have considered the implications of such a view is hard to say, for this implies that we are only forgiven of sins of which we are aware and about which we repent. What of sins about which we have no discernment? Certainly we aren't forgiven on the grounds of ignorance. Or, if forgiveness must be transacted according to their strict formula, are believers (being forgiven in Christ Jesus) unforgiven with each new transgression? That is, are we unforgiven until new repentance is forthcoming, is our salvation jeopardized? Are we caught on some sort of carnival ride, a pendulum ship, so that with each new offense we swing up into unforgiveness and then upon repenting we swing back and up into the forgiveness range of divine mercy—constantly swinging back and forth from forgiven to unforgiven, unforgiven to forgiven?

It is critical that we reject the idea that repentance actually becomes the ground, as in earning the privilege, satisfying a justice, to be forgiven. The conditional model of forgiveness makes our repentance the forgiveness-trigger. Forgiveness is loaded and ready for firing, awaiting repentance to pull the trigger. This compromises the work of the Reformation and the gospel it championed, casting sin-

42. Volf, *Free of Charge*, 183.

ners back upon themselves. Worse, this scheme makes divine grace and the forgiveness that grace embodies dependent upon human achievement.

In fact, forgiveness is not conditioned by repentance in this way. God forgives us before we repent. Forgiveness gives; repentance receives. Forgiveness begins with God's favor and grace, love and mercy, for justice demands satisfaction. To be graciously placed on the path of love and favor is already a form of forgiveness, though not its full achievement. Forgiveness, then, isn't just a transaction; and repentance contributes nothing to forgiveness except to receive it. Thus, repentance doesn't enact it or even transact it, for forgiveness is not stingily withheld, waiting for the offender to repent. Rather, it is bestowed; but unless the offender repents (acknowledging guilt and wanting forgiveness) it is a gift not received. In any case, forgiveness in the form of favor and kindness toward offenders involves not treating them as justice demands (even as God does not treat us as justice demands) but love and mercy prevail. That is a form of forgiveness. This is what conditional forgiveness advocates refuse to accept.

In their hands, forgiveness becomes a commodity or product that can be had at a price—contrition. It is blessed merchandise, hallowed drama that is yours for the price of admission. God waits for your repentance so that he can forgive you. Similarly, you wait for the offender's repentance so that you can forgive him or her.

This is quite mistaken. Forgiveness isn't a commodity; it's a gift. It isn't possessed at a price; it's received in the only way such a gift can be received, by repentance, for that is the nature of the gift. For example, if I give a homeless person a Happy Meal from McDonald's, such a gift can be received properly and truly only by eating the food. The gift is given, but if the food is not eaten, the gift wasn't actually received. But the eating of the food isn't the condition for giving the gift. On the contrary, the giving of the food enables the eating of it. The same applies to forgiveness. Our repentance isn't the condition for God giving us the gift of forgiveness. Rather, the giving of forgiveness enables our repenting to receive and enjoy it. Imagine *offering* a hungry, homeless soul the Happy Meal under conditions, holding out the food (but not yet giving it to him), while you bid him, "Say, 'I need food,' and it's yours." This portrait is not how God forgives us in Jesus Christ, nor is it how we ought to forgive others.

3.5. God's Grace Precedes Repentance

It is critical that we recognize that divine grace precedes our repentance and that that same grace produces repentance in us. In no wise may we allow a conditional forgiveness approach to condition divine grace. God's grace is decisive at every stage and facet of redemption, not only in the objective work of salvation but also in its subjective

appropriation. God's grace goes before our repentance, produces repentance in us, and follows after our repentance. His grace certainly is not conditioned by our repentance, dependent on it, or needing it. Our repentance is too flimsy and wishy-washy for salvation to depend upon it. But having said that, we also affirm the importance of repentance as a fruit of God's grace.

In that connection, we observe that "... God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son ..." *without our repentance*. Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary *without our repentance*. He suffered under Pontius Pilate *without our repentance*. He was crucified, dead, and buried *without our repentance*. He descended into hell *without our repentance*. On the third day he rose again from the dead *without our repentance*. He ascended into heaven *without our repentance*. He sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty *without our repentance*. From there he shall come to judge the living and the dead *without our repentance*.

We must see what divine grace and love really are. God loves us and gives Christ as our surety, our savior, *without our repentance*. And so, likewise, Christ atoned for our sins, bore our penalty, went down into the curse and decay of the grave, arose triumphant from it *without our repentance*; and he gives us the Holy Spirit, who *moves us to faith and repentance without our repentance*. In short, the sovereign work of God, regenerating us, translating us from death to life, is *without our repentance*. And make no mistake, God *works faith* in our hearts *without our repentance*—repentance does not produce faith; repentance does not make us embrace Christ; repentance doesn't sanctify us just enough to be now, finally and truly, forgivable. Repentance is not a good work, say, the only work or the only work coupled with faith, that makes us justifiable before God, or deserving to receive forgiveness. All this is terribly mistaken. The truth is, while we were yet sinners—*unrepenting sinners, sinning sinners, belligerent, shaking-fists-in-God's-face sinners*—Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). We are saved by grace, not repentance. We are forgiven by grace, not repentance. We receive Christ, for forgiveness, by grace through faith, not by grace through repentance. To be sure, repentance is a sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit wrought in us, but it is not how we apprehend Christ for our justification, i.e., for the remission of our sins, pardon, and acceptance with God, enjoying the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us. Our acceptance with God is not even partly, even in the tiniest measure, by, through or from our repentance. To suggest it is, is to fall back into Roman Catholic errors regarding our justification by bringing sanctification into divine pardon. It confuses faith and fruits of faith; but faith alone apprehends Christ in trust. The conditional forgiveness scheme reintroduces the idea of faith plus good works—the good works of repentance or works of love. We must not give in to this error. Instead, let us remember this: God, who is rich in mercy, takes us from the sta-

tus of “under wrath” and “dead in sin,” and makes us alive in Christ—all that without our repentance (see Eph. 2:1-5). But, yes, all that *unto our repentance*.

3.6. God’s Grace Produces Repentance

As noted above, we mustn’t overvalue repentance, making it into a condition for the working of God’s grace, but neither may we undervalue it, rendering it irrelevant. Indeed, repentance isn’t nothing; and it ought not to be shortchanged. As a fruit of God’s grace worked in us, repentance is a fruit of faith. But it is a fruit, not the root of faith. We might say that repentance presupposes faith, which is God’s gift.

As we saw above, faith and repentance together include a profound sense of personal confession regarding guilt, pollution, and helplessness; an apprehension of God’s mercy in Christ; remorse for and hatred of sin, and a resolute turning away from it to God, and a persistent pursuit of a new life of holy obedience.⁴³ Again, all this is God’s work of grace in us by the Holy Spirit. Even as a divine gift, however, repentance is not the instrument by which we take hold of Christ for our justification. That belongs to faith alone. It is wholly mistaken to think that believers are justified before God by faith *plus repentance*. If that were true, then justification would not be by faith *alone*. Indeed, to make *repentance*, with faith, the necessary condition for forgiveness, i.e., for our justification and pardon in Christ, is to declare in favor of the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification. This is precisely Rome’s point: faith receives the gift of God’s forgiveness *in the way of contrition, penance, works of love, etc.*—faith plus the works of faith; faith plus repentance. Justification includes sanctification.⁴⁴

On the contrary, the biblical portrait of forgiveness declares that *faith* receives the gift of God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ, not repentance. That is to say, repentance is not co-instrumental with faith for apprehending Christ and his righteousness for us. It is important to be clear on this point. Forgiveness is indeed promised to sinners in the way of faith and repentance, for repentance accompanies faith; and the person who believes in Christ, trusting in him for salvation, also repents. Thus, it is certainly true to say that God does not pardon the unrepentant. But none of this means or entails that repentance, with faith, justifies, for repentance is neither meritorious nor an instrument by which we obtain Christ for our justification. Repentance does not render us “now forgiven.” Faith in Christ, being bonded or united to him by the Holy Spirit, does that. Repentance is the inevitable fruit of new life, and from new life a new love for God.

43. See Heidelberg Catechism, Q/As 88-91; the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 15; Larger Catechism, Q/A 76; and Shorter Catechism, Q/A 87.

44. See Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1996-2005.

With that love comes a loathing of our sins and, consequently and subsequently (because of love and following after love), repentance. Repentance is a fruit of faith; it is part of conversion but not the apprehending of Christ part. Repentance is the turning from the old self, old habits, dispositions, behaviors, attitudes, thoughts, words, and deed. Faith takes hold of Christ. Repentance turns against self. The two are not on parity. They are not one and the same thing.

Meanwhile, we note that the Holy Spirit himself is a gift of God *bestowed* upon us, *not merely offered*, and that without our repentance. But he is a gift given to us in order to bring us to repentance. Repentance is a fruit of faith and that makes it, finally and ultimately, a fruit of the gospel. Although conviction of sin might normally be through the law, repentance, the turning from sin, is a fruit of the gospel. Faith too is born from the gospel, from the invitation of divine mercy, from the promise of welcome and forgiveness, of a pardon already prepared and accomplished. Faith and repentance, to be sure, walk together, such that where there is one, there is also the other; but they are not at all the same in function.⁴⁵ Again, repentance is not co-instrumental for our justification. At best, repentance forms part of the knowledge of faith, and that only incidentally, since a person can be convicted and convinced of the guilt that he or she bears, and therefore also repentant, yet have no faith in Christ. Such a person can refuse to walk in or accept pardon.

3.7. Why Are Sinners Forgiven by God?

This brings us to the question why does God forgive sinners? The answer is not because of their repentance. Where would we be as sinners, where would Christian assurance be, if repentance functioned the way conditional forgiveness advocates suggest—as a necessary condition for forgiveness, as a *sine qua non* (the “without which nothing”) of salvation? In fact (and *gladly* in fact), Christ continues to love us and forgive us even when we are not “all-repented-up” moment by moment, day by day for *all* our sins. Salvation, centering on divine forgiveness, is not an “on/off switch,” changing from “off-to-on” with fresh repentance (=saved), and then changing again from “on-to-off” with sluggish or incomplete or neglected repentance (=unsaved).

We must be clear: If we ask ourselves, following Scripture, *why* God forgives us, that is a distinct question from asking, *upon what* and *upon what qualities* we are forgiven by God. *Why* we are forgiven by God, according to Scripture, is thoroughly grounded in and conditioned by God’s love and grace. There is no “why” except that God graciously loves and has mercy on sinners—a mercy that is revealed concretely in Christ’s atoning work for us and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Our works, our faith, and our repentance have nothing to do

45. See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV: 452.

with the *why* of God's forgiveness. If we ask not *why* but *upon what* or *upon what qualities* we are forgiven by God, again, in no case or circumstance is forgiveness grounded in works of faith, works of repentance, or *any of our works at all*, and certainly not in our faith or repentance as such. We are in fact forgiven upon the work of Christ in the way of vicarious penal substitution—that's the *upon what* we are forgiven. If we ask the question, *upon what qualities* are we forgiven, i.e., what *effects* or *qualities* or *dispositions* ground or condition God forgiving us? The answer again must be grounded in divine grace, for the work of the Holy Spirit, who produces faith in our hearts, the faith by which we receive Christ and all his benefits, is likewise from God's grace alone. The fruits of faith are also from God. So, yes, by faith we receive Christ for our justification; and, yes, that faith bears fruits of repentance (feeble as it is), along with the beginnings of new obedience (weak as it is); and so, yes, the faith that trusts in Christ for salvation and forgiveness is a repenting faith, a works-of-love faith, a fighting-against-sin faith, etc.—but none of these effects, or qualities, or dispositions either merit forgiveness, or condition God's love for us, or make effectual Christ's atoning work for us.

Repentance is an effect, a quality, a disposition that issues from faith itself, and as such is wholly a work of divine grace. Repentance issues forth from faith, and as such manifests a specific fruit of faith, namely the embrace and acknowledgement of God's verdict of guilty upon us, coupled with the beginnings of turning away from and putting to death of the old self. This fruit of faith, however, does not grant forgiveness to us. Nor does it make us forgivable. Christ's work does that. It doesn't render us "able to be a recipient of forgiveness"—that too belongs to the work of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit through faith. Faith bonds us to Christ. Instead, as we saw earlier, repentance is about truth.

Repentance isn't Protestant penance. It isn't that God needs something beyond his justice visited at Christ's cross. It isn't that God needs "a pound of flesh" *a la* Shylock. It isn't that our repentance makes God soft and tender toward us—that is, it renders him gracious or willing *to forgive* or *to bestow forgiveness*. It isn't that God is resolute to execute his justice without our repentance. God executed his justice on the cross against his one and only Son, Jesus Christ our Savior. Make no mistake: Christ has satisfied God's justice at the cross; and God's softness and tenderness and love and grace is why he gave us his one and only Son (see John 3:16). Our repentance effects no *Umstimmung Gottes* (a change in God); not even Christ's atonement does this strictly speaking, for in his love and mercy God gives us Christ to appease his wrath and atone for our sins. In love, God gives us Christ, true God and true righteous man, to fulfill the

just requirements of his law for us, including the penalty of the law against our sin and guilt.⁴⁶ God's love and justice are fully expressed in Christ's atoning work, and the God who is loving and gracious in this way doesn't, because of the cross, then become loving and gracious toward us. Repentance is about a change *in us*, not in God. Our repentance effects no change in God. The change in us, manifest in repentance, is a work of God's unchanging grace.

3.8. Forgiving Like God and Union with Christ

"To forgive *like* God" means mercy given where mercy isn't sought. To play the game of tit-for-tat forgiveness would mean that the only sins of which we are forgiven are those about which we have repented. But how does one repent of unacknowledged sins or unrecognized sins?

Take, as an example, a sincere Christian who also happens to be a racist. This person, Sandi, does not believe she is a racist. She is open to conversation and polite to everybody. While she admits that she is uncomfortable with people who talk funny and dress oddly, she loves them just the same. She is fine with them being in her church. Yet she balks, if only in the privacy of her heart, at the idea of these "sorts of people" taking on leadership roles in the church, or attracting others of their ilk into the ranks of the congregation; nonetheless, she is quite confident that no racism dwells in her heart. Sandi is convinced that she has no such inclinations or passions. Consequently, she never repents of being a racist; she never confesses her sin to God or asks for forgiveness. In her mind, no such sin exists. Perhaps others have noticed her attitude and told her that she in fact has racist tendencies. She reflects on this and concludes with conviction that in this area of her life she gets a clean bill of spiritual health. Yet Sandi is wrong in that assessment. Many Christians have lived their whole lives as racists, others as gossips, still others as spendthrifts, and yet have never assessed such sins to themselves. Then, too, there are believers who do not acknowledge some sins *as sins*. They don't and won't repent of words, deeds, attitudes, actions, dispositions, or habits which they do not count as sins—even though they are sins. Are all such believers unforgiven since they are unrepentant? If so, then likely no Christian is actually forgiven of all his or her sins. It is ridiculous and arrogant to suppose that you know and acknowledge *all* of your sins. In fact, the way God forgives us *in Christ Jesus* is not a tit-for-tat equation; it is not a mere transaction of the sinner repents, God forgives. If that were the case, repentance is penitence that counts for something alongside of grace. This is an odious notion and contrary to the gospel.

46. See Heidelberg Catechism, Q/As 12-19.

When it is argued that we must forgive like God, and that God only forgives those who repent, the proponents of conditional forgiveness inadequately explore how God forgives us and in what way. The simple transaction model, which declares that when we repent, God forgives, renders each component in the transaction a *sine qua non* for forgiveness to take place—meaning, without repentance there is no forgiveness. This model actually fails to reckon with the way God forgives, for his forgiveness is grounded in grace and love, both of which far outpace our repentance. His love and grace reach farther than our repentance; and God bestows the forgiveness of our sins not only for sins we confess but also for sins we don't confess, that is, for sins we don't even recognize in ourselves and, consequently, don't repent of (at least, not cognitively this side of glory). Moreover, the simple transaction model, claiming that this is how God forgives us (tit-for-tat, we repent, God forgives) fails to reckon with the fact that believers are forgiven *in Christ*. That is, God forgiving us is part of a package deal, centered on *union with Christ*, with all his benefits.⁴⁷

As believers, our union with Christ includes *rebirth and renewal* by the Holy Spirit (attaining a new identity in him), *conversion* to the Lord in the way of faith (which is a gift wrought in us by the Holy Spirit), *justification* (including not only the forgiveness of sins but also our being reckoned righteous in God's sight with Christ's righteousness, the positive reckoning that we have fulfilled the law perfectly), *adoption* into the family of God, *sanctification* (the continual dying away of the old self and the coming to life of the new self), *perseverance* in faith (the Holy Spirit keeping us bonded to Christ in the way of faith), and *glorification* (which is our putting on perfection and enjoyment of the full harvest of salvation in its power and splendor). These blessings are woven into one another and belong to believers absolutely. In addition, these blessings are born of divine grace, center on Christ himself as our Mediator, Advocate, Savior, and Lord, and include the work of the Holy Spirit, without which we would not enjoy any of them, including our union with Christ.

The above shows that our puny repentance doesn't make us forgivable people. That is, repentance is neither our own work, nor a good work, nor our one contribution to the forgiveness equation. Christ atoned for our sins fully; our repentance doesn't render us "able to be forgiven." Such notions are quite out-of-bounds of the gospel. In fact, biblically speaking (as earlier observed), repentance is itself a work and fruit of the gospel—which means our repentance is a work and fruit of God's grace working in us. As Herman Bavinck

47. See Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 32; also see Lewis B. Smedes, *All Things Made New: A Theology of Man's Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970); Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 447-53; A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), 482-86; idem, *The Atonement* (Repr., Grand Rapids: Guardian Press, n.d.), 198-211; and Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011).

explains: "... faith and repentance ... are components of the gospel, not the workings or fruits of the law." This means that they are each a gift of grace. To be sure, the law demands faith and repentance; but the law cannot give what it demands. Only the gospel does that. Even more, the law can convict sinners of being sinners and demonstrate the need for mercy; but the law isn't itself merciful; and it cannot convey or bestow God's mercy in Christ. "[W]hile the law can produce penitence (μεταμελεια, *metameleia*), it cannot produce conversion (μετανοια, *metanoia*), which is rather the fruit of faith." And faith, for sinners, is a fruit of the gospel. Unlike the law, the gospel "offers the gift of faith" to believers unto receiving the righteousness of Christ.⁴⁸ This is nothing less than justification and the forgiveness of sins. Human forgiveness cannot track with God's forgiveness in innumerable ways. What is more, repentance, which is a fruit of the gospel and the Holy Spirit's operations in us, is couched in an entire redemptive program that God effectuates in us. To forgive others as God forgives is not a replete but a small comparison. It isn't trivial or insignificant; but neither does it compare with the nature and work of God forgiving us.

Our being forgiven by God is grounded in our union with Christ. We have a new identity in him—and all our sins are covered, including sins we do not (yet) recognize in ourselves or regard as sins. Perhaps one poses the objection that we can still ask God to forgive us of sins that we do not recognize or acknowledge. But that won't do, since, for conditional forgiveness supporters, forgiveness requires a repentance that turns away from the sinful behavior, the sin must be named and confessed and forgiveness sought for *it*. Unknown sins are, by definition, sins about which a person cannot repent. This leaves you unforgiven.

4. Some Pivotal Biblical Texts

Finally, inasmuch as there may be some lingering uncertainties regarding the import of the conditional statements contained in some pivotal biblical texts, we turn to the examination of these passages in an effort to clarify their meaning and implications for the discussion at hand. It is surely beyond the scope of this essay to examine the multitude of biblical materials relevant to the topic of forgiveness. For our purposes, we limit ourselves to four texts, namely Matthew 6:12, 14-15; Matthew 18:33-35; Luke 17:4; and 1 John 1:9, since many proponents of the conditional forgiveness view appeal to these as pivotal texts. We offer a preliminary analysis of each of them, demonstrating that the conditional forgiveness scheme is not what is in view.

48. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* IV: 454.

4.1. Matthew 6:12, 14–15—The Fifth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer

“... and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.... if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (ESV).⁴⁹

4.1.1. The Kingdom-Context of the Lord’s Prayer

In considering this text, the first thing we should bear in mind is that Jesus teaches us this prayer in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, and that sermon teaches us about the new regime we are under in Jesus Christ, i.e., we now live under the inaugurated kingdom of God. This means we are a community of believers in him, who already taste the future; we already, in the here and now, live with the badge of future glory imprinted on us. We are a community with the blessings of the eschaton as our permanent address. Our citizenship is in glory—the glory to come. Thus, we utter this prayer as a community reconciled to God, and therefore called to practice reconciliation to one another. We pray the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer as *kingdom-church*, as *under-the-reign-of-Christ-church*, who are forgiven; and in forgiving our debtors we are anticipating the future to come—reconciliation in Christ and therefore forgiveness in glory. Indeed, the debtors in view are principally brothers and sisters within the Christian community.⁵⁰

49. Remarkably, the parallel passage in Luke ties receiving and giving forgiveness as receiving “good gifts” from our Father in heaven. Even more remarkable, however, is that the Lucan account assumes that, in petitioning for God’s forgiveness, we are already practicing the same to everyone. Thus, we are assured of God’s forgiveness even as we practice forgiveness toward all people. There is no suggestion here that we only forgive those who have made a formal request to be forgiven. “ ‘... and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.’ And he said to them, ‘Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, “Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him”; and he will answer from within, “Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything”? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’ ” (Luke 11:4-13 ESV).

50. “The right of the eschatological community to utter the Lord’s Prayer depends, as does the efficacy of the prayer, upon communal reconciliation. Hence the Lord’s Prayer must be prayed by a church whose members have forgiven one another” (W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988-1997), III: 617.

A second thing to bear in mind surrounding this prayer, including this petition, is that we are a new-Exodus community. John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus the Messiah by “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4 ESV). To fail to practice forgiveness is to deny the arrival of the Messiah, and so deny the arrival of the kingdom of heaven.

What John the Baptist does by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins was not merely “to enable individuals suffering from bad consciences to seek relief. More than that, to be baptized, to go through the Jordan, was to re-enact the Exodus. John’s action suggests that this was how Israel’s God was redeeming his people. John was heralding the real return from exile, ‘the Forgiveness of Sins’ in that sense. He was getting people ready for the arrival of her God.”⁵¹

Jesus is the kingdom-bringer who is our ultimate deliverance from bondage. Baptism is a journey through the Red Sea—we pass from death to life, from bondage to freedom, from unwashed and unclean to cleansed and sanctified. John can baptize for the remission of sins, but Jesus is the One who forgives sins. He stands in the place of sinners in his baptism because he will also hang in the place of sinners on the cross—all that unto the remission of our sins. Jesus enters the tomb of death in order to bear its curse for sinners, and thus bring them to life in his resurrected life (cf. Matt. 3:15; John 13:8; Titus 3:5).

This is the new-Exodus. This is the real Return from Exile—his kingdom come! This is God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven. This is daily bread, greater than manna from heaven. This is the forgiveness of debts, greater than temple sacrifice; and this is deliverance from temptation greater than the wilderness generation experienced, a generation that failed time and again, only to perish in the desert sands. So as new-Exodus community, we seek to hallow God’s name, live for the manifestation of his reign, do his will, and seek his forgiveness as we forgive our debtors. Therefore, we forgive as forgiven people, as new-Exodus people, as kingdom citizens, as rescued-from-exile people—having passed from death to life in our baptism in Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:13). With the coming of the kingdom of God, we have become the forgiveness-of-sins people. That is the kingdom-context of this petition.

In this connection, we consider Calvin’s useful comments on this text (“as we forgive...”). Says Calvin, Jesus speaks this way for a reason.

The condition is made to prevent anyone daring to approach God to seek forgiveness without being quite free and clear of hatred. Not that the pardon that we ask to be given us de-

51. N.T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 52.

pend on that which we grant to others, but Christ decided to urge us in this way to put aside all injuries, and at the same time to have us confirm our own absolution, as by the imprint of a seal. There is no difficulty in [the parallel account of] Luke's reading *kai gar* ('for in fact'), which has the same effect as *siquidem* ('if indeed'/'since indeed') or *eternim* ('and in fact'): it was not Christ's intention to indicate a cause, but only to tell us the attitude we should have towards our brothers in the process of desiring to be reconciled with God. If the Spirit of God reigns in our hearts, then all ill-will and feelings of revenge must go. As we have the Spirit as the witness of our adoption, we see that this indication is simply put here to differentiate the sons of God from the outsiders. The word *debtors* here [means] those who for wrongs done to us have crossed our paths.⁵²

Commenting on this text in his *Institutes*, Calvin explains that the debts we incur are paid according to God's "free mercy." God has made satisfaction to himself by his own mercy in Christ (cf. Rom. 3:24). In praying for God's forgiveness "as we forgive our debtors" doesn't mean that we, strictly speaking, remit guilt. Instead, it means that we willingly cast from our minds "wrath, hatred, desire for revenge, and willingly banish to oblivion the remembrance of injustice." If we ask God to forgive us while we harbor hatred in our hearts, while we plot revenge for a wrong, or conceive of doing harm to another to even the score, or while we fail to seek reconciliation with our foe, then "we entreat God not to forgive our sins." The petition is clear: Lord, do not forgive us unless we forgive others. We should not, then, "seek forgiveness of sins from God unless we ourselves also forgive the offenses against us of all those who do or have done us ill." Not that the *condition* set forth here means that we merit or deserve God's forgiveness *because* we forgive others. "Rather, by this word the Lord intended to comfort the weakness of our faith." Christ adds the condition to this petition to assure us that God "has granted forgiveness of sins to us just as surely as we are aware of having forgiven others, provided our hearts have been emptied and purged of all hatred, envy, and vengeance."⁵³

Calvin's remarks nicely show that conditional forgiveness is not the focus of this text. On the contrary, what is in view is a resignation of all negative dispositions and feelings toward our debtors. We don't ask for forgiveness while we harbor hatred toward others; instead, we forgive them. And, clearly, what is not being taught here is that God forgiving us is contingent on our forgiving others. That would cast us back upon ourselves. Our pardon doesn't depend on

52. Calvin, *Comm. Matt.* 6:13, (CNTC) 212.

53. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.xx.45.

the pardon we give to others. Rather, we are a forgiven people seeking forgiveness and seeking to forgive others. Forgiveness commences with forfeiting anger and bitterness, ill-will and revenge.

4.1.2. *The Heidelberg Catechism on the Fifth Petition*

It is useful as well to examine a Reformation catechism's treatment of this text. Inasmuch as the Heidelberg Catechism is one of the most highly regarded catechisms of that period, we look at its interpretation of the meaning of this petition. In referring to our sins as debts or trespasses, clearly both sins of *commission* and sins of *omission* are in mind. As sinners we have failed to give to God and our neighbor what we owe each of them. The point is clear: as Christians we must ask for forgiveness and give forgiveness for every kind of sin. In Lord's Day 51, Q/A 126 the Heidelberg Catechism says the following:

Q. What does the fifth request mean?

A. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors means, Because of Christ's blood, do not hold against us, poor sinners that we are, any of the sins we do or the evil that constantly clings to us. Forgive us just as we are fully determined as evidence of your grace in us, to forgive our neighbors.

According to the Heidelberg Catechism, we are forgiven because of Christ's blood. In other words, we plead a payment made for our sins by our Redeemer, our Sponsor. We plead a stake in Christ's work of atonement. Thus we do not plead our faith; we do not plead our repentance. We do not plead our good intentions. We do not plead to God to be pardoned for our sins because of our resolve or depth of contrition. We plead the blood of Christ—specifically, that the payment for our sins has been accomplished by him and God has been pleased to accept it. God himself endured and suffered the wrongdoing that is ours.

Moreover, in pleading Christ's blood we acknowledge that to be forgiven refers not only to specific and particular sins—and, yes, forgiveness surely refers to such sins which are ours aplenty—but we also confess that our "sinful nature," which constantly clings to us, needs God's pardon. Thus, we petition God to this effect: Do not hold against us our sins, and do not hold against us our sinful propensities; don't hold against us the taint and depravity of our nature. Don't hold against us—i.e., do not reckon us guilty, damnable, and therefore condemned—because we still sin so much even as Christians, because we still want to sin so much and cannot stop wanting to sin so much, even as Christians. We are befouled people; forgive us! Forgive also my sinful nature.

The Heidelberg Catechism reminds us that as we pray this prayer and as we seek to practice forgiveness ourselves, we do so as “poor sinners.” This means that Jesus teaches us to forgive sin while we recognize *we are sinners*. He teaches us to *ask* for forgiveness *while we practice forgiveness* to fellow sinners. Jesus teaches us to *look for divine grace* while we practice human grace. He teaches us to *seek pardon* while we bestow the same. As we confess sins to God, especially our sins against others whom we have harmed, we seek to confess our sins to them as well. Indeed, our confession of sin involves a confession about our *sins* and a confession about our *sinfulness*—that is, as already noted, we ask forgiveness for “the evil that constantly clings to us.” Interestingly, we do not first look for repentance or penitence as such, as Jesus says in Mark 11:25, “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses” (Mark 11:25 ESV). Instead, the Heidelberg Catechism bids us to pray that petition in a disposition of free grace, as “evidence” that we are forgiven people, as evidence that God’s grace and love are working in our hearts: “Forgive us just as we are fully determined, as evidence of your grace in us, to forgive our neighbors.” This shows that the practice of forgiveness to others images God’s grace toward us as sinners. Indeed, we are like God—forgiving like God—not because *we are God* or are *righteous like God* or because we have the same *rights like God* but because we are to be loving and gracious like God. We extend mercy as we seek it and offer it to others. We are new-Exodus people; we are kingdom of God people; we are the forgiveness-of-sins people. Thus, we pray for forgiveness as we practice it among ourselves.

Failure to forgive is to live as if we are still in death and bondage, as if the kingdom hasn’t come, as if you do not believe at all! “Failure to forgive one another wasn’t a matter of failing to live up to a new bit of moral teaching. It was cutting off the branch you were sitting on.” In other words, Jesus says it this way so that we understand clearly that we’re new-Exodus people, and the reason we are such, is because the forgiveness of sins is happening with the arrival of Jesus Christ. Not to live out your forgiveness is to deny “the very basis of your own existence.”⁵⁴ David Turner aptly notes that, without question, this verse warns disciples

... not to ask for their needs to be met in a spirit that is unwilling to meet the needs of others. Rather, disciples will realize that their experience of God’s forgiveness enables them to forgive others (cf. 5:23-24, 38-48; 18:21-25). This has been misunderstood by some classic dispensationalists as ‘legal ground,’ which teaches that our forgiving others merits God’s

54. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 54.

forgiving us, as some classic dispensationalists implied.... Rather, the point is that God's initiative in graciously forgiving us should motivate us to forgive others. Forgiving others demonstrates that we have been forgiven by God. Forgiven, we have been freed to forgive. This is not the reverse of what Paul taught (cf. Matt. 5:23-24; 9:2, 5, 6; 12:31-32; 18:32-35; Eph. 4:31-5:2; Col. 3:13; contra Gaebelien and Walvoord).⁵⁵

Lastly, it should be noted that the function of "*if...clauses*" in verses 14 and 15 is not a condition of necessity or a causal condition, for this doesn't fit the grammatical point of the passage. What may be called a third class conditional sentence (ἐάν + subjunctive) function generally to propose what is uncertain of fulfillment but nonetheless likely to occur. It can signify simply a logical connection between the protasis and the apodosis, or a mere hypothetical situation, or a more probable future occurrence. The broad range of possibilities often leaves this sort of conditional sentence open to interpretation. The usual function of this sort of conditional sentence, however, "addresses a *generic* situation in the present time (broadly speaking), while the *more probable future* addresses a *specific* situation in the *future* time."⁵⁶ The point, then, is not that we insert philosophical necessity or a causal power to the conditionality in question. Thus, whereas there is a clear parallel taught in this text between divine forgiveness and intra-human forgiveness, the point is that the forgiven community of the church must be a forgiving community, for the way of love for neighbor issues forth in forgiveness. The point is not an imposed causal necessity between our practice of forgiveness which grounds God forgiving us.

4.2. Matthew 18:33–35—the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

“And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matt. 18:33-35 ESV).

Among the important passages in the New Testament that give instruction on the practice of forgiving others is Jesus' instruction in Matthew 18:21-35, where, prompted by Peter's question of the number of times we ought to forgive those who have sinned against us,

55. David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, eds. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 189-90.

56. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 697; see 686-99.

Jesus turns seven instances of forgiveness into seventy-seven and uses a parable to explain the generosity and freeness of forgiving others—even the costliness of forgiveness to the one who practices it. This parable also teaches that those who understand the graciousness of being forgiven will in turn practice it toward others.

This text, it is argued, supports the idea of conditional forgiveness since the king forgives the indebted slave *after* he pleads for mercy and since the fellow slave likewise pleaded for mercy from the one to whom he was indebted. Forgiveness follows repentance or forgiveness follows a plea for mercy. But it should be observed that the indebted slave did not repent as such, he only asked for more time to repay his debt (an absurd idea, really, given the size of it); likewise, the fellow servant did not ask for forgiveness of the debt, he asked for more time to repay what he owed. The point of the parable isn't to show how God gives us more time to *pay our debts to him*. Rather, God forgives debts we can't repay—and he does that from his own motives of love and mercy. This parable teaches that God gives what isn't asked for, namely forgiveness of the debt. We should do the same—give what isn't as such sought, namely forgiveness.

Conditional forgiveness advocates read this parable of the unmerciful servant, however, as teaching that divine forgiveness is contingent on our own practice of forgiveness. Because you forgive others, God will forgive you. After receiving the king's generous forgiveness (for his debt amounted to a huge fortune), the slave promptly threw into prison a fellow slave who was unable to repay him a puny hundred denarii (a denarius was about a day's wage). In turn, the king, learning of this, reversed his decision and threw the first slave into prison "until he would pay his entire debt" (vs. 34). The parable even ends with a grim warning: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (vs. 35).

Miroslav Volf notes that it certainly appears that our refusal to forgive yanks back God's forgiveness. It appears that we can un-earn forgiveness. Though we cannot earn forgiveness, we can "un-earn it." So the parable seems to teach us that God's forgiveness is conditioned on our performance. If this were true, however, the "forgiveness of our sins would be placed into our own hands, based on our will and strength to forgive." What is more, then, "The gift itself would turn into a law that demands, and one that demands more than the law written on tablets of stone ever did."⁵⁷

Volf urges caution. He follows in the footsteps of the Reformers when he says, "But maybe to think this way is to take an illustration too literally...." The point of the story is much more likely that "God's forgiveness and our forgiveness go hand in hand as do God's unforgiveness and our unforgiveness." Jesus isn't saying that our unfor-

57. Volf, *Free of Charge*, 155.

giveness *causes* God's taking back forgiveness. "Rather than triggering a loss of God's forgiveness, our unforgiveness may just *make manifest* that in fact we haven't allowed ourselves to receive God's pardon."⁵⁸

When we are new creatures in Christ, forgiveness is put into practice. Faith awakens a heart of love, of devotion, of grace, which in turn *passes on* forgiveness to others. "If, rather than being troubled by my inability to forgive, I don't want to forgive, there is a good chance that I haven't in fact *received* forgiveness from God, even if I believe that I have."⁵⁹ David Turner makes the point that in being unforgiving toward a fellow servant, the man with the enormous debt reveals that "his plea for mercy was a hoax." The point is that "[t]hose who have genuinely received forgiveness will be forgiving to others...."⁶⁰

G.C. Berkouwer, a modern Reformed writer, echoes Calvin's sentiments, commenting on the parable in question, where it seems that God's forgiveness is conditioned by our own:

Throughout the New Testament, whenever the words 'even as' are sounded whether in relation to God or to Christ, it is the mercy of God that receives all the emphasis. The parable of the Unmerciful Servant ties in graphically with this theme. It is the story of a man up to his ears in debt who, though himself released from it, for some paltry shillings grabs another man by the throat. The cogency of the parable consists in the fact that this penny-snatching ingrate is delivered 'to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due' (Matt. 18:34). The consequence is inevitable: 'So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not everyone his brother from your hearts' (Matt. 18:35). Although our deeds of mercy and forgiveness seem to precede the mercy of God, this parable makes plain both the priority of God's mercy and the obligations resulting from it.⁶¹

Berkouwer is simply restating the classic Reformed view, grounded in classic Reformed exegesis. We should not undervalue or underplay this dependence of forgiveness upon forgiving. But it would be unhelpful to say that God's forgiveness is conditioned by ours, because forgiveness is by divine grace and does not come from any work of ours. As Klyne Snodgrass observes, God's action precedes our own. "The indicative of God's forgiveness precedes the im-

58. Volf, *Free of Charge*, 155-56.

59. Volf, *Free of Charge*, 156.

60. Turner, *Matthew*, 451-52.

61. G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, Studies in Dogmatics, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 150.

perative of our response. ... [T]he ethic is a responsive ethic, a response to God's grace and calling."⁶² What is more, God's "[m]ercy is not effectively received unless it is shown, for God's mercy transforms. If God's mercy does not take root in the heart, it is not experienced. Forgiveness not shown is forgiveness not known." It is therefore not saying too much to declare:

This parable ... pictures the magnanimous and limitless grace of God in forgiving the incalculable debt of sin. This Jubilee forgiveness is made available in Jesus' present kingdom, but grace always brings with it responsibility. The forgiveness of God must be replicated in the lives of the forgiven, and the warning is clear. Where forgiveness is not extended, people will be held accountable.⁶³

Meanwhile, we must remember, too, that this parable teaches us what God's *kingdom* is like. "*Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to ...*" (Matt. 18:23). The presence of God's kingdom of grace and mercy is the environment in which all New Testament imperatives function. Divine grace precedes, undergirds, and motivates the believer's obedience. We do well to follow Calvin when he says that "the sum" of this parable "is that those who are unbending in forgiving the faults of brethren, certainly have not their own interests at heart, and are setting up a standard too hard or heavy for themselves, for they will find God to be equally strict and inexorable towards them."⁶⁴ Thus, Calvin offers the practical observation that while all persons want forgiveness from others they are slow to extend it towards others. The worry is that generous forgiveness will encourage more sinning by offenders. Christ, however, is not impressed by this concern. There is no limit set in the department of forgiveness. The point is "to enjoin us never to give up."⁶⁵

62. Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 74.

63. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 75. Similarly, Tom Wright observes, "The key thing is that one should never, ever give up making forgiveness and reconciliation one's goal. If confrontation has to happen, as it often does, it must always be with forgiveness in mind, never revenge." As for Jesus's words that the unforgiving will be unforgiven, Wright notes that "[f]orgiveness is ... like the air in your lungs. There's only room for you to inhale the next lungful when you've just breathed out the previous one. If you insist on withholding it, refusing to give someone else the kiss of life they may desperately need, you won't be able to take any more in yourself and you will suffocate very quickly." Your heart (like lungs) is either opened or closed. "If it's open, able and willing to forgive others, it will also be open to receive God's love and forgiveness. But if it's locked up to the one, it will be locked up to the other" (Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part Two* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004], 39-40).

64. Calvin, Comm. Matt. 18:23; Luke 17:4, (CNTC) 234.

65. Calvin, Comm. Matt. 18:21; Luke 17:4, (CNTC) 234.

4.3. Luke 17:4—Temptations to Sin

“... and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him” (Luke 17:4 ESV).

The next passage we wish to consider is Luke 17:4. This text forms part of a series of instructions regarding temptations to sin. Calvin addresses this verse, observing that some people maintain that these words teach conditional forgiveness, i.e., we are required to forgive only when the wrongdoer has come to us seeking forgiveness, expressing repentance. Could it be, then, that “Christ does not command us to forgive save when the sinner is turned to us and declares his penitence”? Is it the case that Christ gives “permission to His people to deny pardon and mercy to the wicked”? Those who advocate conditional forgiveness, notes Calvin, say in effect that “Christ does not order us to grant *forgiveness*, till *the offender turn* to us and give evidence of *repentance*.” Calvin’s French text adds these words: “for it appears in this way that he [Christ] commands his followers to shut their heart against the obstinate, and to refuse them pardon.”⁶⁶ Such is the disposition which describes the conditional forgiveness view. Calvin is explicit in not granting this simple conclusion. He explains that sins are forgiven “in two ways.”⁶⁷

If anyone does me an injury and I set aside any feeling of revenge and do not cease to love him and even repay him with benefits instead of injuries; although I may think badly of him, as he deserves, yet I may be said to forgive him. For when the Lord bids us wish our enemies well, He does not demand that we shall approve in them what He Himself condemns, but only wishes our minds to be purged of hatred. In this sort of forgiveness it is not a question of someone who has sinned coming spontaneously to be reconciled to us or of an obligation upon us to love those who set out to exasperate us and reject our friendliness, and heap up old offences against us.⁶⁸

Thus, although I have just cause to wish this offender to face justice, having injured me, this first sort of forgiveness lays aside the desire for revenge and instead exercises love towards the offender, even repaying meanness with kindness. This isn’t to call evil good, for forgiveness, even of this type, is first to declare the person guilty and to regard him unfavorably, as he deserves. Only the guilty are the

66. Calvin, Comm. Matt. 18:21; Luke 17:4, (CTS) 364.

67. Calvin, Comm. Matt. 18:21; Luke 17:4, (CNTC) 234.

68. Calvin, Comm. Matt. 18:21; Luke 17:4, (CNTC) 234.

proper objects of forgiveness. This is what it means to love our enemies, to wish them well despite their wrongdoing. Forgiveness of the wicked is not approval of the sins they commit, which God rightly condemns. Rather, this sort of forgiveness involves a turning away from desires for revenge and hatred. Our minds must be “purified from all hatred.”⁶⁹ Such is the first sort of forgiveness—the forgiveness of the wicked. It does not have to do with wrongdoers who are seeking reconciliation or expressing repentance to us; likewise, it does not mean we must forgive those who *perpetually* sin against us, heaping upon us more wrongs.

The second sort of forgiveness concerns a brother in the Lord. Says Calvin, this is

... when we receive a brother into our favour in such a way as to think well of him and be convinced that the memory of his fault is wiped out before God. And this is what I said at first. Christ is not talking here only about the injuries done to us but about any sort of sin at all. For He wants those who have fallen to be raised by our mercy. And this doctrine is very necessary, because by nature we are nearly all too critical; and Satan impels us to a most harsh rigour under the guise of strictness. Because of this, sadness and desperation swallow up unhappy men who are denied forgiveness.⁷⁰

It is important that we see that the second type of forgiveness involves receiving a brother into favor, regarding him as forgiven in the sight of God. In this instance, the person’s sins—all his sins—are reckoned as remitted before God. This forgiveness is the opposite of our massive vindictiveness, for Satan deceives us into thinking that our strict concern for justice, our being in the right, justifies a stingy withholding of mercy from those who seek it. Compassion is withheld, cruel exactitude imposed, so that vile sinners are driven to grief and despair, their pardon being withheld.

At this juncture, however, Calvin also issues a caution. It is not the case that believers are blindly to forgive anyone who professes to be repentant. We are still to exercise discernment otherwise we “err willingly and knowingly.” We are not to be mocked with counterfeit repentance. We are not to give up the practice of discretion, giving offenders license to damage us to the hundredth misdeed. Calvin elaborates, offering these observations. First, the words of Matthew 18:21 and Luke 17:4 have to do with “daily faults,” and even the best of people need forgiveness and pardon. “When we have such a slip-

69. Calvin, Comm. Matt. 18:21; Luke 17:4, (CTS) 365.

70. Calvin, Comm. Matt. 18:21; Luke 17:4, (CNTC) 234-35.

perly road to tread and so much weakness of the flesh, what will happen if all hope of pardon is cut off at the second or third fall?"⁷¹

The second observation is that

Christ is not depriving believers of discretion, to be foolishly credulous at the merest word, but only wishes them to be fair and humane and to reach out a hand to the penitent when they show signs of being sincerely displeased with themselves. Penitence is a holy thing, and therefore needs to be examined carefully. But whenever a sinner gives a probable sign of conversion, Christ wants him to be admitted to reconciliation and not to be broken and lose heart by being repulsed.⁷²

A final observation is also in order regarding the nature of the conditional clauses presented in this text. In Luke 17 the "*if clauses*" (ἐάν + subjunctive), refer to a condition of eventual, probable outcome—"if ..." (and of course he will), meaning, "if he sins" (and he eventually, probably will), and "if he repents" (and he eventually, probably will), you shall forgive.... This isn't an "if clause" forming a condition which is the ground for forgiveness.⁷³

4.4. 1 John 1:9—Walking in the Light

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9 ESV).

The last passage we wish to examine is 1 John 1:9. The context for this text is the exhortation for believers to walk in the light. Inasmuch as God is light and not darkness, and inasmuch as we are to walk in step with his goodness and love, if believers instead walk in darkness, then fellowship is destroyed and our Christian testimony is a sham. If we claim to be without sin, we are deceived and we are not walking in the truth. Thus, the words of verse 9 follow in contrast to the claim that we are without sin: *If we confess our sins....* This corresponds to walking in the light. A genuine walking in the light confesses the darkness that yet touches our lives, our sins. Confession of sin, by implication, also enhances Christian fellowship, for such confession corresponds to walking in God's light. Confessing sins is a perpetual feature of the Christian life, not because we move in and out of divine forgiveness but because we continue to sin and there-

71. Calvin, Comm. Matt.18:21; Luke 17:4, (CNTC) 235.

72. Calvin, Comm. Matt.18:21; Luke 17:4, (CNTC) 235.

73. On this text, see Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, unabridged, revised edition in one volume (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981); and Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek: Illustrated by Examples*, English edition adapted from the fourth Latin edition by Joseph Smith (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1963).

fore we need to constantly appropriate to ourselves God's grace in Jesus Christ. The confession of sins is founded on divine promise, for God is *faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*.

Here we see that grace grounds repentance. The work of Christ is the foundation of forgiveness and cleansing; and the new birth that causes us to walk in the light and to confess our sins is likewise a fruit of God's gracious initiative and work. God is the faithful One who is also just. He keeps his promises, and his promise of forgiveness is completely reliable. Thus, "The efficacy of confession of sin lies not in the confessor but in the faithfulness ... and righteousness ... of God, whose Son's blood was shed for this very purpose (v. 7)."⁷⁴ To confess our sins to him is not to venture into uncharted or uncertain territory—will he forgive me or not? On the contrary, the believer may venture with confidence that God will forgive readily and altogether. We hear echoes of the covenant in this language, and the fulfillment of the new covenant in Christ as announced in Jeremiah 33:8.⁷⁵

The conditional clause in this text "has the force of an implied command," that is, "we should confess our sins, and when we do so, God is faithful and righteous to forgive us." In other words, with the implied imperative this clause states "a general truth."⁷⁶ Or, alternatively, the conditional clause forms an adversative to the conditional clause in verse 7. "The alternative to denying one's sin is to confess it." The clause expresses in part what may take place in the future (upon confessing sins you will enjoy forgiveness) and in part a general truth (confession and forgiveness go together). What it does not do is form a necessary condition or a causal condition which moves God to forgive us or forms the basis of forgiveness in some way.

5. Conclusions

What may we say in response to those who argue for the idea of conditional forgiveness, claiming that this model best represents the way God forgives sinners? We offer the following by way of summary conclusions.

First, the conditional forgiveness model, claiming to parse out forgiveness according to the divine model, fails to reckon with the multiple ways human forgiveness cannot model God's forgiveness. It is therefore unhelpful to argue for "forgiving like God" without noting the key differences between the ground and manner of God's for-

74. Karen H. Jobes, *1, 2, & 3 John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 71.

75. Jobes, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 71.

76. John L. Anderson, *An Exegetical Summary of 1, 2, & 3 John* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1992), 32.

giveness and our own. Among the obvious differences are the fact that God is just and we are unjust; God is without sin and we are still infected with sin; God is not moved to love and kindness and tenderness toward us because of our repentance, whereas our ability to view an offender with tenderness is often greatly assisted by their heartfelt repentance; our being forgiven by God is grounded in our union with Christ, but for you to forgive your unbelieving boss at work isn't because he or she is united to Christ by faith. Examples like these can easily be multiplied.

For us to forgive like God is not some kind of parity. Rather, the point of the comparison is that we should be generous and gracious like God in forgiveness. The fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer is not first about our making ourselves worthy of forgiveness by our acts of forgiveness. Instead, it is first about requesting God's generous forgiveness (knowing how merciful and gracious it is!) while exhibiting that same generosity of forgiveness to others. We seek and practice forgiveness simultaneously. The fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer does not require a strict transactional model of "repentance, then forgiveness." No, forgive us our debts (forgiveness is requested without a listing of offenses) as we forgive our debtors (there is no mention of repenting debtors).

Second, it is mistaken to advocate conditional forgiveness without adequately explaining the meaning of that conditionality. The biblical materials cannot bear the weight that conditional forgiveness proponents place upon them. Conditional clauses are not simply a matter of grammatical construction but also of grammatical function within a larger discourse of teaching. Moreover, the biblical materials do not argue in any case for a philosophical conditionality of a necessary cause between repentance and forgiveness. There is no causative conditionality in view; and given the larger portrait of the doctrine of salvation as presented in Scripture, it is mistaken to make human repentance a key pillar in the forgiveness equation. Our repentance is too puny and wavering, too infected with excuse and ungodly traits, to make it one of the supports of God's forgiveness of sinners.

Consequently, and thirdly, the transaction model of forgiveness presses a feature of interpersonal relations too far while it simultaneously underplays the gift of grace that makes our receiving of forgiveness possible. It is mistaken to flatten out and reduce the biblical idea of forgiveness to the transaction model. We do better to follow Calvin and many other authors who recognize sorts and layers or levels of forgiveness. God's disposition of love and kindness is already a form of forgiveness since offenders are not being treated as their sins deserve. More, God works positively, graciously, and self-sacrificially for the atonement of our sins and the meeting of his justice. We cannot claim the same in the transactional model of "you must repent before I can forgive." Calvin bids us to desist with a constant score-keeping, something the transactional model encourages,

even as that model presses for the wronged party to be a perpetual confronter of wrongdoers. You must get them to admit their offense, for their benefit. But, in fact, practically speaking, the tally tilts in favor of the offended party, not the offender. We easily feel justified in pointing out an offender's injustice. Thus, this model lends itself to abuse and shortsightedness on the part of the victim, a bit of "Let me help you with the speck in your eye," while failing to notice the log in his or her own eye (see Matt. 7:3-5).

Fourth, this transactional model of conditional forgiveness misrepresents the function of repentance in the forgiveness equation (as if it's our one good work contributing to God's gracious program). Repentance forms no ground for God forgiving us. Rather, the giving of forgiveness enables us to repent and therefore to receive and enjoy God's pardon. To be sure, the Holy Spirit, in working conversion in us, employs our own intellectual, volitional, and emotional faculties so that we are engaged as moral agents in repentance; we are consciously engaged in turning to God and from our sin because of his grace. But since repentance is of grace, it brings nothing to the table of forgiveness. Repentance receives what God has placed on that table. Hungry people eat because someone generously gives them food. We repent because God generously gives us forgiveness. Repentance merits nothing.

Fifth, working out further the comments above, the conditional program of forgiveness fails to see repentance as a fruit of faith, not some kind of co-instrument for the attaining of Christ, for the reception of his righteousness. Repentance is a fruit of faith. It is critically important that we recognize that divine grace precedes our repentance and that that same grace produces repentance in us. In no wise may we allow a conditional forgiveness approach to condition divine grace. Repentance is an effect, a quality, a disposition that proceeds from faith itself, and as such it is entirely a work of God's saving grace. Repentance, then, issues from faith, and as such is a specific fruit of faith. In repentance we embrace and acknowledge God's verdict of guilty upon us, and we begin to put to death our old self. As a fruit of faith, repentance is not a cause of divine pardon, nor does it render us forgivable. Only the saving work of Christ does that. Neither does repentance render us "able to be a recipient of forgiveness." Instead, our repentance, as a fruit of faith, receives the gift of forgiveness as it embraces the truth about our sin and God's mercy. In this way we neither overvalue nor undervalue repentance. It neither forms a necessary or causative condition of forgiveness nor is it rendered irrelevant. Repentance isn't nothing and should not be slighted. Insofar as repentance may be viewed as a condition, it is a condition that God himself fulfills in us. It certainly does not move or enable God to forgive us. At best, then, repentance is a condition of consequence regarding forgiveness, for it follows after forgiveness. It is

not strictly a prerequisite for forgiveness. It is a fruit of faith, not our contribution to divine pardon.

But, in saying that, sixth, we must not turn repentance into Protestant penance. God needs nothing beyond the righteousness of Christ to forgive us our sins. God is not determined to execute his justice upon us unless we repent. No, God's grace runs ahead of us, and leads us to repentance. God has executed his justice on Christ at the cross. Consequently, Christ has satisfied divine justice for us completely. There is no suffering we must endure to be forgiven. As such, it is wholly mistaken to infect justification with sanctification, to infect forgiveness with repentance. Our repentance brings about no *Umstimmung Gottes*, but our repentance does bring about a change in us. We love because Christ first loved us (1 John 4:19).

Seventh, and last, this model of forgiveness implies that only the sins we formally and knowingly repent of are forgiven by God, leaving us with unforgiven sins, given that there is no forgiveness without formal repentance. But sinful humans are incapable of knowing all their sins this side of glory; and, more, being sinful sinners we sometimes fail to identify some of our sinful propensities and behaviors as *sinful*. As a result, we do not repent of some sins we should repent of. Following the conditional forgiveness scheme, such sins are unforgiven, for there has been no repentance concerning them. In fact, this transactional, tit-for-tat scheme ("we repent, God forgives") fails to reckon with the fact that believers are forgiven *in union with Christ*. Given that union, we may gladly affirm that we possess, already now, a new identity. We are new creatures; and we already have the complete forgiveness of all of our sins. Believers can therefore live with blessed assurance: Christ loves us and forgives us even when we are not "all-repent-ed-up," for we are not our own but have been bought at a price (1 Cor. 6:20); and while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8).