



Is Forgiveness Enough? Reflections on an Odd Question

GERHARD O. FORDE

*Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota*

Where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation.
—Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*

THE QUESTION POSED IN THIS ISSUE OF *WORD & WORLD* IS NOT ONE THAT OUGHT either to be asked or answered. It belongs rather to the sort that should simply be turned back on the questioner. "Is forgiveness enough?" "Speak for yourself!" And beware! The answer will be something of a confession. The very question, you see, has the effect of putting forgiveness on the defensive. That is especially the case given current sentiment. Permissiveness has replaced prohibition; the search for a gracious neighbor has displaced the quest for a gracious God; we are no longer accounted sinners but rather passive victims of someone else's sin; we allegedly don't suffer any more from the anxious conscience that bedeviled poor Martin Luther; we are not so much guilty as ones who have been shamed; and so on. Surely, given all that, one can hardly maintain that forgiveness even matters much, let alone whether it be "enough."

I. A WRONG-HEADED QUESTION

The question tempts the apologist to construct a case for the all-sufficiency of

GERHARD O. FORDE is professor of systematic theology.

Forgiveness of sins needs no apology. It offers life and salvation. It opens for us the possibility of a future. It exposes the penultimate power and the ultimate powerlessness of sin.

forgiveness. But surely that is wrong-headed. Does forgiveness need an apology? Can or must its sufficiency be demonstrated before it is acceptable? But how can that be? That would put the one who is to be forgiven in the judgment seat. Then everything is backwards. Victims, the oppressed, the shamed, become posers. They propose to enter the arena as claimants to sympathy, ones who have earned the right to judge. The very presupposition of forgiveness, however, at least in a theological context, is that the one who forgives does the judging. Indeed, forgiveness *is* the judgment. It is the word spoken from the judgment seat when death and life are at stake. It is the word spoken by the dying Savior from the cross, the ultimate judgment seat. It is the ultimate judgment, the last word.

Is forgiveness enough? It seems almost blasphemous to ask. Some possible scenarios come to mind. A paralytic is lowered through a hole in the roof by solicitous friends who want to gain Jesus' attention. Jesus says, "Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven." Whereupon the friends and the crowd are incensed and they exclaim, "Is that all?" And Jesus answers, "What is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'?" And Jesus passed on from there and never returned...

A murderer is under sentence of death. Just as the ax is about to fall she is suddenly pardoned by the king. But the prisoner says, "Is that all?" ...

The grand inquisitor, his hands bloody with the victims he has slaughtered in the name of the church, encounters Jesus on the steps of the cathedral. After hearing the inquisitor's elegant apology for his actions, Jesus silently kisses the inquisitor on his bloodless lips. And the inquisitor says, "Is that all?"

Something is wrong here. The question implies that there might be something more. But that draws us into strange and dangerous territory. We might argue, of course, that for the paralytic healing would be in order, might be the "something more" he might desire. Or for the prisoner, restoration to the community and rehabilitation would be more to the point. Or that the inquisitor should be punished or transformed. But even in the face of all that, can one baldly protest that forgiveness is "not enough"?

II. PENULTIMATE AND ULTIMATE CONCERNS

What is wrong? The first step we need to take in sorting out our problem is to pay some heed to the distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate in these matters. When the question is put, "Is forgiveness enough?" the first thing to ask is, "Enough for what?" The immediate answer, surely, is that it is enough for salvation. We are constantly reminded of that in our liturgy by the song of Zechariah when it is said that God's people shall be given "knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins" (Luke 1:77). Such forgiveness is, as already indicated, the ultimate judgment, the last word spoken over and to us in this penultimate world. Indeed, it is the end (*finis* and *telos*) of our penultimate world and the beginning of the ultimate, the end of this old age and the beginning of the new. It brings the turn of the ages to faith. And so it is enough. Faith simply cannot ask, "Is

that all?" It is all! To be faithful is to believe in the forgiveness of sins, and that it is enough.

Of course we will want to say some other things when we turn to consider the penultimate and its concerns. Forgiveness of sins does not straightaway do for us in this age what we might desire. It does not heal the paralytic; it does not put food on the table; it does not bind up all our hurts and pains. If that is the sum and substance of what is hoped for, forgiveness will never be "enough." But then, one might add, nothing will ever be enough. I expect that is the major impetus behind our question. In our culture of complaint and victimization we tend to lose sight of the ultimate and to focus rather on immediate injustices, wrongs, and abuses. So we cry, "Forgiveness is not enough!" We demand rather our rights; we demand justice, the righting of wrongs, the end of all abuses; we want fulfillment, self-esteem, happiness. No doubt these are matters of considerable importance. But they are, nevertheless, penultimate. They need not be dismissed out-of-hand. They are persistent enough to raise a question crucial to this discussion, that of the relation between the ultimate and the penultimate. We shall have to consider this in more detail a bit further on.

For the moment it is apropos to point out that something of a sea change has set in in Christian (if it is any longer that!) piety in these matters, a turning to the world of the penultimate, a concentration on "the sufferings of this present time" (which, we cannot fail to note, St. Paul reminds us "are not worthy of being compared to the glory which is to be revealed to us" — Rom 8:18). Indeed, one can even sense in our question something of a resentment vis-à-vis forgiveness. Forgiveness carries with it the presupposition that we might actually be guilty of something. So there is often more than inquisitiveness at work here: not only whether forgiveness is enough but whether it is at all relevant "to my needs." Why should I need forgiveness since "they" are the ones who are the real sinners and the cause of all my suffering? The very pronouncement of forgiveness is insulting! Is it not rather God who needs forgiving—if we can find it in our hearts to do so?

It has been well said that our world has a lot of trouble with penultimates.¹ Our tendency as people of this age is always to raise penultimate concerns to the level of the ultimate and to ignore the ultimate. We are always tempted to sell our ultimate birthright for a mess of penultimate pottage. The scriptures constantly exhort us to resist such temptation. The supreme instance of such resistance is the temptation of Jesus. The prince of the penultimate promised Jesus everything if he would but grant its ultimacy. Jesus was starving, but he declared that we shall not live by bread alone but by the word that proceeds from the mouth of God. He was enticed to put on a great demonstration of miraculous power, but he refused to tempt God. He was offered sovereignty over the entire world if he would but worship its lord, but he insisted that God alone was to be worshiped and served. Jesus' refusal to allow penultimate concern to overwhelm the ultimate takes him in

¹See the fine treatment by Lou Smith, "The Proclamation of Forgiveness, Life and Salvation," *Lutheran Forum* 29/4 (1995) 29-32.

the end to the cross. There in the agony of the “sufferings of this present age,” he cried, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Is that not enough? John’s Gospel put it only slightly differently: “It is finished!”

We should be aware that we are sailing in dangerous waters when we ask whether forgiveness is enough. The compass goes awry. The ship founders on the rocks of the “sufferings of this present age.” The sense for that which transcends us or the idea that we are accountable for anything is eclipsed. God is no longer the one whose judgment we await in fear and trembling. The proclamation that God is love has been so endlessly drummed into us that it has become a pitiable platitude, a meaningless cipher. Since God is love, love, love, forgiveness can just be taken for granted. It is a rather paltry matter. Apparently we no longer need to worry about such trifles as divine wrath or judgment. The penultimate has simply overwhelmed the ultimate. Whatever has happened to those fearful words of Mal 3:2 that Handel’s *Messiah* recalls to us every Christmas?

But who may abide the day of His coming?
And who shall stand when He appeareth?
For He is like a refiner’s fire....

But the importance of the forgiveness of sin does not reside only in the fact that it is the last, the ultimate word. The fact that forgiveness is the ultimate word also affects and gives shape to the penultimate realm in which we live “for the time being.” Where there is forgiveness of sins, we learned in Luther’s *Small Catechism*, there is not only salvation but also life. Without forgiveness everything goes awry. Forgiveness presumes that something is wrong and must be so judged. Where forgiveness is no longer paramount the “gospel” of affirmation and acceptance takes over. Things are not wrong, they are just different, and need non-judgmental affirmation and acceptance.² As Alan Jones, Dean of Grace Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco has put it, “We live in an age in which everything is permitted and nothing is forgiven.” Some years ago (1973) Karl Menninger wrote a book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* Sin, he said, had disappeared from our vocabulary. But when sin disappears, forgiveness will not be far behind. But where shall we be then?

Forgiveness sets an eschatological end to the law and at the same time establishes it in its rightful place. Where there is no forgiveness everything is permitted, nothing is judged. Where there is no forgiveness we have to take steps to absolve ourselves by reducing the law to manageable proportions or by getting rid of it altogether. We become antinomians virtually of necessity. Law slips and falls out of place. Where the ultimate word of forgiveness is not spoken, the penultimate realm becomes chaos. Is this not where we are arriving today? There are no limits, no boundaries. Everyone or anyone is fair game. “Drive-by” shootings are almost daily occurrences. People disappear and are never found.

²Ibid., 30.

III. FORGIVENESS OPENS THE FUTURE

The words from Luther's *Small Catechism* that stand over this article are probably more literally true than we are used to thinking. Without the forgiveness of sins not only salvation but also life itself is threatened. Without forgiveness of sins there is really no future for us. When we sin, the future is closed by the past. When, for instance, we have a serious falling out with someone and there is no forgiveness, our future with that someone is forever closed. The past then controls the future. We can see this all around the globe, not just in personal but also in national and international terms. Millions are being slaughtered because there is no forgiveness. Abuse breeds abuse. The chain is unbroken. The past closes down the future.

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." So we pray as our Lord has taught us. We debate about whether that means that God's forgiveness is dependent upon our forgiving those who sin against us. But that is, of course, beside the point. Were it true, it would be simply the last desperate and rather perverse attempt to control the future by manipulating even forgiveness. Of course, it may be true that in some instances (penultimately at least) our past with someone is so painful that we would rather it remained closed. But then this petition must give at least some pause.

Forgiveness is entry into a new and unconditional future in faith, a new age where we are given a new start. We forgive as we are forgiven. This is the very foundation of the "new obedience" spoken of in article 6 of the *Augsburg Confession*. As Luther could put it, "It is as if God said: 'I am obliged to forgive them their sins if I want the law fulfilled by them; indeed, I must also put away the law, for I see that they are unable not to sin, especially when they are fighting, that is, when they are laboring to fulfill the law in their own strength.'"³ The law itself demands that we act out of love, freely and spontaneously. Where there is no forgiveness we don't do that. We are using the law constantly to make up for the past. But the law simply can't do that. So the past retains its control and we can never catch up. So sin, law, and death reign.

IV. TO FORGIVE SIN IS TO EXPOSE IT

Forgiveness is the way God chooses to relate to a fallen creation. Etymologically forgiveness means to "give away," to "give up," to pardon without harboring resentment. Its root is the same, obviously, as "gift." The "for" in for-give comes, apparently, from the same root as "far," meaning "away." So it means to "gift away." It is no doubt true that this sense of giving away, giving up, is both ultimate comfort to us as well as something of an offense. As old beings we like to coddle our resentments as well as to hang on to the claim to control our own future. Forgiveness can be something of an insult to all that. Like justification it has a polemical edge. It cuts both ways. It comforts and assures the afflicted at the same

³LW 33:218.

time as it afflicts the comfortable. By forgiving sin it also exposes it. Both the penultimate power and the ultimate powerlessness of sin are revealed in the fact that forgiveness is the only way it can be dealt with. Jesus did not come into the world exhorting people to “stop sinning.” He came to forgive sin. Indeed, it has been well said that he was crucified because he forgave really wicked people. What is revealed thereby is the absolute necessity for the “gifting away.” The necessity for the gift exposes the very nature of sin, both its reality and its intractability. Sin *is* to live the unforgiven life, even if, or perhaps especially if, that involves our earnest striving to fulfill the law on our own steam. Forgiveness makes it plain that God has two problems with us. One is most obvious to us. It is our misdeeds, our sins. The other, however, is usually hidden from us. It is our “good” deeds, our *sin*. There is nothing for God to do about that than to forgive it. So, to repeat Luther’s word, if God is to get his law done, he must forgive sin. That exposes both its penultimate power and its ultimate powerlessness. Its penultimate power resides in the fact that it is the temptation to go it alone, a temptation we are powerless to resist on our own. But because there is forgiveness, *sin* is ultimately powerless. Like its counterpart death, it shall have no dominion.

In conclusion, it is perhaps necessary to say something about the use of the words “forgiveness of sins” today in theology and liturgy. Is forgiveness the only “metaphor” to be used, or the best, or the highest? For some time now it has been a kind of pastime among many biblical exegetes and theologians to play word-games with biblical and theological concepts. So it is often maintained that other biblical concepts are better or richer or more relevant for our time, or it is pointed out, for example, that St. Paul never mentions forgiveness in his writings. In the discussion on justification in the Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue, Roman Catholic theologians liked constantly to remind Lutherans that justification was only one item in the biblical spectrum of terms for our relationship to God. Of course forgiveness is not the only way to speak of salvation. It is indeed permissible, helpful, and enlightening to hear different words. Much could be said about such matters, but that is not the question of this issue.

Nevertheless I seize the opportunity to say a couple of things—more personal observations than hard and fast conclusions. Forgiveness seems somehow to be in a class by itself. It usually refuses to remain just a description like other concepts and presses always to be translated into the doing of it. I expect that is why it has always been so prominent, not to say permanent, in the liturgy, preaching, and conversation of the church. Forgiveness drives to absolution. It not only presses for action but, as we have pointed out, exposes the sinner to whom it is addressed. Words like reconciliation and redemption are not only primarily descriptive, but tend to be “softer,” i.e., they tend to picture fallen creatures more as passive victims of a fate not of their own making. We have “become estranged” (somehow!) and need to be reconciled. We have been “taken captive” (somehow!) and cry for redemption and release. They don’t seem to point the finger so directly. Perhaps that is why moderns prefer them.

The second observation is about the unity of doctrine. I don’t believe it

helpful to push the difference among the various words to the point of driving wedges between them. We do indeed owe much to those who have pointed out the differences. But now the time has come once again to see the unity of the whole. One would no doubt have to launch into an extended discussion of the use of theological language to make that appear more than bald assertion. Here I merely resort to something Luther said in his great Galatians commentary. "Doctrine," he said, "is like a mathematical point. Therefore it cannot be divided; that is it cannot stand either subtraction or addition."⁴ Forgiveness, surely, is not something different from reconciliation or redemption or justification, as though those things were somehow available without it or led to some different end. For the end is life and salvation. Where forgiveness is, they are given as well. So I conclude pretty much where I began: Is forgiveness enough? Speak for yourself – and take care! ⊕

⁴ LW 27:37.