



Writings of W. Burney Overton

Burney's Papers

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The Dynamics of Forgiveness

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"Will you give a program at the Church Night Supper the first Wednesday of Lent?" The questioner was Paul Hooker, Associate Pastor at Shallowford Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, GA.

"Sure," I replied. "What would you like for me to do?"

"This year, the program focus for Lent is on Forgiveness. How about talking on, 'The Dynamics of Forgiveness'?"

"You want 1/2 hour program on 'The Dynamics of Forgiveness'?"

"You can stretch the time to 40 minutes if it will help."

So I agreed to do the program, and committed myself to staying within the scheduled 30 minutes.

All things considered, the program went well. At least Paul seemed to think so. He – doing better than I – shortened and summarized the program for THE GOOD NEWS, the weekly news sheet of Shallowford Church. I reproduce it here.

"Forgiveness is for the forgiver." "Forgiveness is always before the fact."

Burney Overton has a way of making me think again about things I thought I understood. And when he said those words Wednesday night in his talk on the "Dynamics of Forgiveness," he made me think. I began to realize that forgiveness is not an act, but a state of being. It's not something I do in response to something someone else does. It's an attitude I take toward other people. If I am forgiving, I have a predisposition toward maintaining the relationships that bind me to others. If I am forgiving, I approach those relationships with a commitment that I will not allow – in so far as I am able – those things which the other person had done to sever or damage the relationship between us. I don't forgive in order that the other person might see how magnanimous I am; I forgive because the relationship is important to me and by forgiving, I am able to participate in helping it grow.

It seems to me that the forgiveness of God must work that way, too.

-Paul

Because of what Paul wrote, and because of other responses to the program, I decided to write what I had said (and maybe add some thoughts) as the first paper of the 1989 Series of *BURNEY'S PAPERS*.

Actually, this paper is a sequel to #2 of the 1987 Series, "Grace and Forgiveness." If you compare, you will find some repetition. However, this time I want to focus more on the forgiver.

Much that is written and said about forgiveness has to do with people needing and seeking to be forgiven. I don't for one minute doubt or question that people need to know that they are forgiven. I simply suggest that the dynamics of forgiveness center in forgiving and not in being forgiven. Forgiveness is for the sake of the forgiver much more than for the sake of the one receiving forgiveness. Forgiveness is an attitude assumed – a position taken – a belief that one brings to a relationship.

You, the reader, might like to do what I suggested to the people at the Church Night Supper. Think of a situation in your own life where your forgiveness is needed or indicated. Keep that situation before you as you read, and see whether or not what you read fits for you. Remember, the situation is one in which your forgiveness is indicated, not one where you would seek to be forgiven. I emphasize the point for you may have a tendency to slide back into thinking in terms of being forgiven.

I will use a simple, rather uncomplicated situation as my illustration.

Occasionally, a person who has scheduled a counseling hour with me will fail to keep the appointment and will not have notified me. That's no big deal, although it often means that another person who could have used the hour doesn't have a chance to do so. To facilitate using the illustration, I will give the person the name of Bill. That is a common enough name to prevent singling a person out, isn't it?

So Bill doesn't keep his appointment, and doesn't notify me. When he comes in for the next appointment, he is embarrassed and a bit anxious about my reaction. So he is clearly uncomfortable and very apologetic, all the more since he had just forgotten that he had the appointment. He needs to be reassured that I have forgiven him before he can get on with his counseling agenda.

While he feels the need to be forgiven, the simple reality is that I need to forgive him far more than he needs to be forgiven. I neither need for my lack of forgiveness to stand in the way, nor want it.

And forgiveness is always before the fact. After the fact isn't really forgiveness, although people generally seem to believe that it is.

I am aware that people have difficulty with the concept. It may help if I am clear about what I understand forgiveness to be, and why it is before the fact.

The definition I used in "Grace and Forgiveness" was, "To forgive you is to excuse you from the consequences of your behaviour and not to hold you accountable to me."

I need to modify the definition a bit.

I neither have the right nor the power to excuse you from the consequences of your behaviour. Consequences are inevitable. And I do not have the right to impose

consequences as a prerequisite to your being forgiven. I might have the power, but not the right. Maybe the State does. And maybe a part of the responsibility of parents is to see that children experience the natural consequences of their behaviour. I learned from experiencing consequences when I was a child, and still do. However, I suggest that, in our normal adult relationships, it is not my right to impose consequences upon you, nor to excuse you from the consequences of your behaviour – not on any basis, and certainly not as a condition to be met before I forgive you.

And, in the same manner, it is not my right to hold you accountable to me to obtain my forgiveness. If I try to do so, we are no longer dealing with forgiveness. We are dealing with the issue of the price I require you to pay for me to agree to continue in the relationship.

That issue has nothing to do with whether or not one is forgiven.

Of course I was inconvenienced. Of course, somebody else missed an opportunity for an appointment. Of course, Bill missed out on whatever the appointment would have meant to him. He paid a price. Other people paid something, too.

If, because he missed the appointment, I said to Bill, "You owe me. You have to make amends. You have to be properly penitent. When you have suffered enough and have paid the price I judge to be sufficient, then I will forgive you and accept you back into the relationship.", I wouldn't be forgiving him at all. I would be making him accountable to me. I would be making him pay a price I had set. I don't have that right.

According to my dictionary, the definition for the verb, to forgive, is to give up claim to the right to make you pay; to remit the penalty; not to hold you accountable to me.

The definition is secular and there is some pretty good theology in it. It points to grace – God's grace, and ours.

Of course, Bill needed to realize that there were parameters. For his sake as well as that of others, I could not allow him to make a practice of forgetting his appointments. If he persisted, searching into what was going on would become a part of the counseling agenda. I might even have to say to him that I could not continue to hold a counseling hour for him. But none of that would be to make him pay a price before he was forgiven. I owed it to him to deal with him responsibly. The requirements he had to meet to keep a counseling hour had nothing to do with whether or not I forgave him for having missed an appointment.

"Please forgive me," Bill might say. "I will do anything you say if you will forgive me."

His doing something I might tell him to do wouldn't change the fact that he had missed an appointment, nor the consequence of his having done so.

"Bill, I forgive you," I reply. "You are already forgiven. There isn't something for you to say or do to earn or obtain my forgiveness. Now let's take a look at what goes on with you that you forget appointments, and what we need to do about that."

I'm not being magnanimous when I tell Bill he is forgiven. Nor am I being generous with him. I'm not being especially kindly, or thoughtful of him. I'm doing what I need to do for my own sake.

For me not to forgive Bill is to try to control and wield power over him. I don't want to do that. I don't want to be in that position. Therefore I need to forgive him far more than he needs to be forgiven.

I say to Bill, "Do what I say. Jump through my hoops. If you don't, I will not forgive you and we won't have any kind of relationship."

If Bill does what I say and jumps through my hoops, nothing will change about the missed appointment and its consequences. That is history, and I will only be controlling him. I will be taking his freedom and responsibility away from him. I don't want to do that. If the counseling is to be helpful to Bill, he must be coming because he wants and chooses to. So, it seems to me, it is with all relationships. If the relationship is to have positive meaning for each person, then each must be involved out of his/her own free will, and past events need to remain past events.

In our relationship, I don't want to play games with you. I don't want to manipulate you into meeting my terms. I don't want to use forgiveness and withholding forgiveness as a tool or a weapon to try to control our present and future relationship. True, it is necessary for us to negotiate the parameters of our relationship, and for each of us to assume his/her own responsibility for maintaining them. But it doesn't work very well for me to make you accountable to me –nor for you to make me accountable to you. And it doesn't work at all if I try to hold you accountable for what has already happened.

Look what happens if we try to make each other accountable. The parameters then are that we must please each other – or else. I am not allowed to be responsible for my participation on its own merit. I can get pretty anxious and fearful about whether or not I am pleasing you or incurring your disfavor. For two people to be controlled by each other that way leads inevitably to unsatisfactory and destroyed relationships.

"Bill," I might say to him with some intensity of feeling, "I am upset with you for not keeping the appointment. You have imposed upon my time. You have cheated someone else of counseling time. Don't you have any respect for me or for them? What's the matter with you anyway?"

So Bill knows how I feel. If you were Bill, how would you feel? Loved? Cared about? Taken into account? Important to me? Open? Responsive? Positive toward me?

Not likely.

You would much more likely feel defensive. Like a failure. No good. Bad. And, almost certainly, angry with me, even if you dared not show it. In that spirit, you might well say, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me." and offer some kind of explanation, but without much heart. Or, you might turn way from me in anger. Then what would happen to our relationship?

Anger has a place in relationships. It is – or can be – a signal that something in the relationship needs attention. However, to try to use forgiveness as a way to overcome anger doesn't work out very well. Neither does it work well to try to use forgiveness as a substitute for confronting the issues out of which the anger rises.

Forgiveness doesn't mean not expecting people to be accountable for themselves – their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. It doesn't mean not having reactions and emotion. It doesn't mean agreeing with the other person. It doesn't mean ignoring the differences.

Forgiveness does mean clearing the slate between us about what has already happened so that we can get on with the work of relating satisfactorily.

There could be some justification in my feeling angry with Bill for not keeping his appointment. There would be little justification nor sense in my holding on to that anger until Bill took appropriate steps to remedy the situation (which he can't remedy because it is already history) so I wouldn't be angry and would forgive him. If he were to, he would be taking those steps for the wrong reasons. And I would be putting the wrong values on our relationship. He needs a better reason for keeping his appointment than that doing so will keep me from being angry with him.

I wonder how what I have been writing fits for you in the situation from your own life that you chose at the beginning of this paper.

I summarize, what I have written.

The chief dynamic of forgiveness is in forgiving, not in being forgiven.

To forgive is to give up claim to the right to make you pay – to not hold you accountable.

To be effective, forgiveness needs to be before the fact. Otherwise, it isn't really forgiveness.

Forgiveness is primarily for the sake of the forgiver, not the forgiven. It is to establish and maintain an attitude of forgiveness that is a main stay of our relationship.

The responsibility of the forgiven is to deal with his/her own part in the relationship, not to appease or repay the forgiver and so be forgiven.

As Paul Hooker said, "It seems to me that the forgiveness of God must work that way, too."

I certainly believe that it does.