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TOWARDS AN EXPLICITLY THEOCENTRIC MODEL  
OF FORGIVENESS BASED ON GOD'S TWO-FOLD  
COMMANDMENT TO LOVE

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
Robert Kenneth Cheong

December 2005

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**APPROVAL SHEET**

**TOWARDS AN EXPLICITLY THEOCENTRIC MODEL  
OF FORGIVENESS BASED ON GOD'S TWO-FOLD  
COMMANDMENT TO LOVE**

Robert Kenneth Cheong

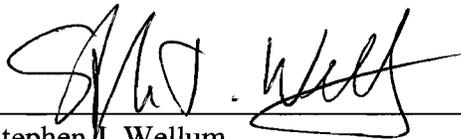
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Eric L. Johnson (Chairperson)



Leigh E. Conner



Stephen J. Wellum

Date 11/30/05

To Karen, my wife,

growing in oneness,

and to

Ashley, Ryan, and Whitney, my children,

growing in grace,

who all teach me how to love and forgive

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## PREFACE

As I look back not only over the months associated with this project, but also over the years of my life, I stand amazed at the gracious lovingkindness and faithfulness of the Lord. To get a glimpse at the ways the Lord has converged my life experiences to lead to this work on love and forgiveness has been a humbling and awe-filled time.

My doctoral work has also introduced me to the joys and challenges of academic collegiality and excellence—all necessary for the betterment of any credible work and ultimately for the glory of God. With that, I am grateful for Eric Johnson, my committee supervisor, who challenged me to read widely, think deeply, and write precisely. I also give thanks to Leigh Conver, my clinical supervisor, who has journeyed alongside of me in and out of my counseling cases. Moreover, I appreciate the unflinching willingness and undeniable expertise of Tom Schreiner and Steve Wellum in their review and critique of portions of my work. Finally, I am thankful for David Powlison, my mentor from afar, who has encouraged me with his listening ear, likeminded heart, and godly example.

No work on love and forgiveness can be done in isolation, apart from the ongoing relationships with others. In addition to family and friends, God has taught me much through those who have given me the privilege to journey with them in counseling, forcing me to think more deeply and rely more heavily on Christ. This work was also made possible by the multitude of prayers by many brothers and sisters in Christ, primarily from our young married Sunday school class and from faithful friends in our neighborhood and seminary; however, there has been no greater prayer

warrior than my wife. Finally, special thanks to Becca Blomker for her patient and precise proof-reading of each chapter.

A special, heart-felt gratitude goes to Karen for her consistent encouragement—through her confidence in my work, her ability to make me laugh, her unwavering prayers, and most of all, the way she loves and forgives me. I am also thankful for each of my children—Ashley, Ryan, and Whitney—who each has taught me, in different ways, the importance of love and forgiveness. My family has been patient and understanding throughout the countless hours of reading and writing, and, Lord willing, I will be able to make up for some lost time with them.

My prayer is that this work is the result of the Lord's leading and that His bride, the church, will be built up by a deeper understanding of and a richer journey in accordance with God's eternal relational paradigm of love. As Paul writes to the church at Ephesus, may we forgive each other, "just as God in Christ also has forgiven [us]. . . . and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us" (Eph 4:32; 5:2).

Robert K. Cheong

Louisville, Kentucky

June 2005

CHAPTER 1  
A CASE FOR A THEOCENTRIC MODEL OF  
FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness and love are most poignantly demonstrated by the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross at Calvary. God's forgiveness of sin flows redemptively through the shed blood of Christ. God's great love shines forth in the fact that Christ died for those who hated Him. God's forgiveness and love are inextricably connected throughout Scripture, but are seen with converging brilliance in the cross of Christ. However, what is the relationship between forgiveness and love within the realm of human forgiveness? More specifically, how is forgiveness understood in light of God's two-fold commandment to love? A right understanding of forgiveness and its relationship to love is crucial as one strives to obey God's commandments to forgive and love like Christ.

**Introduction**

*Statement of the Problem*

Since the beginning of human history, people have failed to love God and others in ways that result in relational transgressions. Therefore, divine forgiveness, the very essence of Christianity, is addressed through the entire Bible and has been studied and taught throughout church history. Relational offenses between humans have also existed since the beginning of time. Puritans such as Richard Baxter offered detailed practical guidelines for interpersonal forgiveness (Baxter, 1846/1996); however, the exhortations to fulfill the biblical mandate to forgive one another were not necessarily accompanied with an explanation of the psychology and practice of forgiveness—the

dynamics of unforgiveness within the soul, and the process involved in moving from unforgiveness towards forgiveness, reconciliation, and love.

Prior to the early 1980, there was little information about the psychology of human forgiveness in the social sciences, let alone any significant empirical studies (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). However, forgiveness research gained momentum after the clinical counseling community was stirred by Smedes' seminal work *Forgive and Forget* in 1984. In the twenty-first century, research funding for the study of forgiveness has reached an all-time peak. Consequently, given the growing empirical evidence of the psychological and physiological benefits of forgiveness, clinicians are more aware of and open to including forgiveness as a viable intervention (Worthington & Scherer, 2004; Thomas, 2000). In a book published by the American Psychological Association (APA), the authors state, "Forgiveness is a powerful healing practice, and we endorse its careful use in psychotherapy" (Richards & Bergin, 2002, p. 213).

The intense investigative effort surrounding the topic of forgiveness is promising, since research can often help bring advancement in understanding. When any area is researched, a cohesive and comprehensive approach is necessary to minimize duplication and divergent results. Not surprisingly, those in the field note that there is a divergence among researchers in the definitions of forgiveness (Hargrave, 1999; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000; Worthington, 1998). Furthermore, though not explicitly highlighted in most cases, there are variations associated with the conceptual understanding of forgiveness—reasons and consequences of unforgiveness, motives for forgiveness, the issue of conditionality, the actual process of forgiveness, the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation, and even the timing and types of forgiveness. Divergent understandings and their assorted emphases within the field of forgiveness occur because of two foundational reasons. First, a fundamental worldview difference exists between modern psychology and Christian theology.

Modern psychology is based on naturalistic and humanistic world-views centered on the experiences of men and women; whereas, an orthodox Christian theology is based on the authority of Scripture and is centered on God. Second, consistent with the method of modern science, empirical research is generally segregated from issues of faith and theology. Therefore, the forgiveness of God and one's dynamic, personal relationship with Him is typically absent from the vast majority of empirical research conducted in the last two decades (Enright & North, 1997; Worthington, 1998). To summarize, the depth and richness of biblical instruction on forgiveness has not been related to contemporary research on forgiveness and the practice of clinical counseling. Consequently, the clinical concept of interpersonal forgiveness was explicitly developed solely with reference to human-to-human relationships with little to no regard for its divine context.

Given the divergence in how to define, and ultimately understand forgiveness, and knowing that every aspect of clinical exploration is shaped by one's presuppositions, there is a pressing need for a transcendent, unifying definition of forgiveness. A given definition of forgiveness determines how forgiveness is carried out, since practical application is inextricably linked to one's theoretical understanding. Methodologically, one can develop a definition of forgiveness based on understanding its various aspects from a human-centered, experiential approach. However, one can just as easily argue these aspects can and should flow out of a definition of forgiveness that originates not from humanity's perspective, but from God's perspective.

### *Statement of Purpose*

This dissertation has a single purpose: To develop an explicitly theocentric model of forgiveness based on God's two-fold commandment to love. This single purpose is developed in three phases. First, a survey of the major works in the field of forgiveness within the past two decades is offered to show the existing understandings.

In presenting the divergent definitions and conceptual understandings of forgiveness found in the field, the need for a theocentric understanding of forgiveness that is consistent with Scripture will be substantiated.

The second phase develops a theocentric definition of forgiveness that is grounded and expressed through God's love and forgiveness as demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and His two-fold commandment to love. The theocentric definition of forgiveness will unify the understanding of the major aspects of forgiveness.

The third phase works toward a Christian psychology of forgiveness which applies the foregoing to the psychological aspects of unforgiveness and the internal dynamics of the forgiven soul as it moves from unforgiveness to the forgiveness of others. This psychology of forgiveness shows that the psychological and relational dynamics associated with forgiveness are consistent with the dynamics associated with sanctification.

### *Definitions*

Establishing a baseline understanding of several key terms used in the course of this study is necessary. The following definitions provide an introductory orientation for grasping the concepts discussed and developed in this project. The terms that will be defined are as follows: theocentric understanding, human forgiveness, the two-fold commandment to love, soul, and sanctification.

The term *theocentric* describes a paradigm established on the premise that everything can and should be understood in explicit reference to God. This paradigmatic orientation is crucial, since God is the Creator of all life in the heavens and earth and does all things according to His good pleasure in Christ (Eph 1:9). What this means is that, life and its struggles must also be understood within the context of God's redemptive history (Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation), as well as the

solution to these struggles, since redemptive history provides the theocentric context within which one lives life. Specifically, an understanding of forgiveness begins and ends with God. The terms *theocentric* and *God-centered* are used interchangeably. Essentially, a theocentric understanding of any concept implies that the concept is understood in a way which is consistent with Scripture, with God and His sovereignty at the core of its understanding and His glory at the heart of its purpose. Conversely, an anthropocentric, or human-centered, approach to forgiveness is either void of God, references God tangentially, or presents God as an optional approach.

The focus of this work is admittedly, on human forgiveness—the dynamic that can take place between individuals in response to an offense committed within the relational context. This project references God’s forgiveness, but only as needed to come to a thoroughly biblical understanding of interpersonal forgiveness. Even though God’s forgiveness is interpersonal, the use of the term *human forgiveness* refers to the human-to-human interaction. Furthermore, unless otherwise specified, whenever the term *forgiveness* is used, one should understand the context to be that of human forgiveness.

Jesus stated that the two great commandments are a summary of all of the Law and the Prophets (Matt 22:37-40; Mark 12:29-31; Luke 10:27): “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength;” “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Given their interconnectedness, these two separate commandments can be considered as a two-fold commandment to love. This dissertation seeks to develop an understanding of forgiveness based on the connection between the commandment to forgive others and the two-fold commandment to love.

The term *soul* is used all through this work, primarily referencing the inner aspect of the person (2 Cor 4:16), in contrast to the outer person, or the body. The Bible presents an anthropological view of human beings as being comprised of both body and

soul (Gen 2:27; Eccl 12:7; Ps 31:9; Matt 10:28); however, Scripture stresses the person as a whole, described ultimately in relationship with God and others. The tension between the whole person and the dichotomous reality can be described by concepts such as an “intimate and vital union of the mind and body” (Hodge, 1997, p. 45), a “holistic dualism” (Cooper, 2000, p. 204), or “psychosomatic unity” (Hoekema, 1986, p. 217). Chapter 4 discusses the concepts of the *created soul*, *fallen soul*, and *redeemed soul*. The term *soul*, as opposed to the terms *self* or *person*, was specifically selected—the discussion focuses on the dynamics within the soul associated with unforgiveness, forgiveness, and the love of God—while fully acknowledging the fact that the person as a whole, is created, fallen, redeemed, and glorified. Scripture utilizes the term *soul*, especially in the Psalms (cf. Pss 35; 42; 57; 62; 69; 103; 119), when focusing on the struggles within the heart and soul of the psalmist, though presupposing the person, as a whole, in relationship with God. The author also acknowledges the dynamic, inseparable interplay between body and soul, which is becoming increasingly evident in the research of neuroscience and neuropsychology (cf. Amen, 2002; Newburg, d’Aquili, Newberg, and deMarici, 2000; Worthington, 2001a).

Sanctification, a theme running throughout the various sections of the dissertation, is understood by two aspects: (1) being set apart by God as His children at the time of conversion (Erickson, 1985) and (2) a continuing “work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives” (Grudem, 1994, p. 746). For the context of this project, sanctification is understood both as a unique position in Christ and as the growth of the whole person in Christ-likeness—cognitively, emotionally, volitionally, spiritually, and physically (Grudem, 1994). An attempt is made to show the dynamics of forgiveness are in concert with the dynamics of sanctification in the redeemed soul.

### *Delimitations*

With a topic as vast as forgiveness, it is necessary to place limits on the research associated with this dissertation. Several broad delimitations are offered. First, the intended audience is the Christian community. A basic knowledge of Christian theology is expected, especially in the area of soteriology. The issue of whether unbelievers can accept what is developed in this project is not addressed.

Second, the research focuses primarily on human forgiveness. Therefore, the aspects of divine forgiveness are not discussed at length, even though the forgiveness of God plays a central role in this study.

Third, due to the enormity of the topic, the survey of literature in the field of clinical psychology and Christian counseling is limited to the major contributors within the last two decades. However, the survey of major works in pastoral theology and pastoral ministry is more extensive, given that much of the writings on forgiveness are nested in larger works by the various authors. Moreover, purely secular works on forgiveness are not consulted for several reasons: (1) Few secular works attempt to work through the issues associated with forgiveness, especially from a psychological perspective. (2) Some secular works express limited benefit and caution the use of forgiveness as an intervention in interpersonal conflicts (Lamb & Murphy, 2002; Murphy & Hampton, 1988). (3) Other works are antithetical to the notion of unmerited favor towards a wrongdoer, given the lack of a compatible worldview.

Fourth, in general, only a select number of relevant empirical studies within the past two decades were reviewed in detail. Extensive research of all the empirical studies on forgiveness was not conducted given that the primary focus is placed on philosophical, theological, and practical works.

Fifth, as noted throughout the paper, the following issues are not covered in detail as they relate to forgiveness: Retributive theories of punishment; workings and healing of memory; developmental theory; personality theories; various doctrinal

differences—for example, theories of the atonement, justification; and the issues revolving around the perpetrator or the offender (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998).

### ***Research Questions***

The overall question that is addressed is this—what is forgiveness from a theocentric perspective? Through the course of the dissertation, the following questions will be addressed in light of the development of a God-centered understanding of human forgiveness: What is unforgiveness? Is forgiveness optional? Is forgiveness conditional? In other words, must the offender repent of his/her sins before the offended one can forgive? Does forgiveness require reconciliation? Is it necessary to forgive God? How does one move from unforgiveness to forgiveness? At what point in the counseling process does one address the need for forgiveness? Are there different types of forgiveness? Why is an explicitly theocentric understanding of forgiveness needed in light of the multitude of works that already exist on this subject? What is the relationship between God's two-fold commandment to love and His command to forgive?

### **Research Methodology**

The research associated with this project is both literary and theoretical, and consists of two major phases. In the literary research phase, the relevant works in the field of forgiveness are surveyed by performing research in three broad areas: (1) empirical research in clinical psychology, (2) works in the Christian counseling field, (3) and the works from the fields of theology and philosophy. Perspectives are taken from each of these areas to evaluate the major issues associated with forgiveness.

The theoretical research phase utilizes the information gathered from and analyzed in the literary research to accomplish three tasks: (1) work towards the development of a theocentric definition of forgiveness based on the two-fold

commandment to love, (2) work towards the development of a God-centered psychology of forgiveness resulting in a comprehensive and unified approach for dealing with the major issues linked with forgiveness, and (3) show how the process of forgiveness is an integral part of the process of sanctification.

### **Summary of Dissertation**

This dissertation is comprised of five chapters. Chapter 1 provides the basis for the literary and philosophical research on forgiveness. Introductory remarks include a statement of the research concern and purpose for this work, definitions of pertinent concepts associated with the topic of forgiveness, and research delimitations. The main body of the chapter provides an extensive and detailed survey of the contemporary efforts of forgiveness from the field of empirical research. The main purposes of this section are to show the degree of divergence in the field, focusing on key issues of forgiveness and to present an argument for developing a robust understanding of forgiveness that starts with and is centered upon God and His purposes.

Chapter 2 develops a definition of forgiveness based on God's two-fold relational paradigm of love. Forgiveness is first examined in light of redemptive history. Then, the theme of forgiveness throughout the Scriptures is surveyed, to include both explicit and implicit references to the topic. Finally, the essential connection between love and forgiveness is examined. This section begins with a discussion about the love of God, then focuses on the two-fold commandment to love, and ends with an argument that shows the inseparable link between forgiveness and the commandment to love. The chapter concludes with a theocentric definition of forgiveness.

Given the establishment of a theocentric definition, chapter 3 develops a God-centered understanding of forgiveness. The chapter begins with a comparison of the theocentric understanding of forgiveness with that of current clinical research and

practice. Then, the major issues of forgiveness are discussed within a biblical and theological framework in order to develop a comprehensive, scripturally consistent, and unified understanding of forgiveness.

Chapter 4 develops a Christian psychology of forgiveness. Forgiveness is discussed as a dynamic within the soul, which includes both mind and heart. Next, the psychological and relational dynamics of unforgiveness are examined, taking into account the reality of suffering and brokenness. The psychological and relational dynamics within a forgiven soul are then explored in two realms: (1) the vertical and internal dynamics between God and an individual, where forgiveness is experienced, and (2) the horizontal dynamics, where forgiveness is called for and carried out in response to an interpersonal breach in a relationship due to sin. Fourth, forgiveness is discussed as a dynamic work of sanctification, necessarily within the person striving to forgive and potentially in the one who is forgiven. The psychology of forgiveness developed in this chapter draws upon the findings from clinical empirical research that are consistent with and serve as a practical manifestation of the Scriptures. The chapter concludes with some essential and practical steps in how one can move from unforgiveness to forgiveness by developing a heart of love. This project shows that the steps towards forgiveness are consistent with a believer's journey of growing in Christ-likeness and is an outworking of his effort to love God with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love others as himself, just as Christ has loved (John 15:12).

Chapter 5 draws some final conclusions on the doctrine and psychology of forgiveness developed within this project. Based on the findings of this study, implications are explored for several areas: for Christian counseling, for clinical research, for the local church, and for every single and married Christian person. Recommendations for further study are also offered.

## Background Information

### *Is the Issue of Forgiveness Culturally Significant?*

According to a Barna survey (Jeffress, 2000) completed in August 1999, approximately 4 out of 10 participants acknowledged they were struggling with forgiving someone. If an accurate estimate, this percentage translates to 55 to 60 million people in the United States who are dealing with unforgiveness—bitterness, anger, desires for vengeance, and/or avoidance. As a subset of the total, roughly one in four (23%) *born-again* Christians, and 1 in 10 (10%) *evangelical* Christians, reported being unable to forgive someone in their lives (Jeffress, 2000). Barna distinguishes evangelical from born-again Christians through seven additional criteria—summarized in general by belief in orthodox doctrine, and in particular by the exclusivity of the Gospel, and the authority and inerrancy of the Bible (see Jeffress, 2000, pp. 210-211). Furthermore, the survey posed five myths associated with forgiveness and used them as the criteria for determining whether or not the respondents had a biblical worldview on forgiveness. The five myths are as follows: (1) “Forgiveness should be granted only if the offending individual shows remorse.” (2) “True forgiveness requires that the offending party be released from the consequences of his or her actions.” (3) “True forgiveness requires that the forgiver re-establish a relationship with the offending person.” (4) “True forgiveness means that the forgiver must also forget what was done.” (5) “There are some crimes, offenses, or other things that people do to one another that can never be forgiven.” Based on these criteria, the survey shows that only 4% disagreed with all five myths. Comparatively, only 5% of born-again Christians and only 8% of evangelical Christians disagreed with all five myths. However, respondents who strongly disagreed with three of the five myths were classified as possessing a biblical understanding of forgiveness. Of the total respondents, 20% were classified as biblical forgivers, while 25% of born-again Christians and 40% of evangelical Christians were placed in this category. The

survey concludes that most people do not practice biblical forgiveness primarily because of an unbiblical understanding of the subject.

Given that the Barna survey suggests a major percentage of the population is wrestling with the issue of forgiveness, how is the counseling and pastoral community dealing with forgiveness? If the number of journal articles and books on the subject is a reflection of whether the work of forgiveness is an integral part of counseling, then the answer to the question is not encouraging. A decade ago, a literature review of material addressing marital infidelity revealed that only 5 of 45 journals and books (approximately 11%) referred to the issue of forgiveness as a way of dealing with adultery (Avila, 1994); however, the literature has significantly improved in the last decade. There are several reasons why dealing with the issue of forgiveness may not be a fundamental component of counseling: (1) Forgiveness is seen as merely a religious virtue (McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997), (2) forgiveness is not conceptually and/or practically understood, (3) forgiveness may be avoided due to the nature of the offense, or (4) the counselor may have a personally negative bias towards forgiveness. Forgiveness must play an integral role in every aspect of life—from the realm of marriage and parenting, the workplace, the church, to the neighborhoods. Perhaps if forgiveness is understood and lived out in everyday relationships, there will be less need to deal with the issue in the counseling office.

### *Contemporary Christian Perspectives of Forgiveness*

When one surveys the current literature on forgiveness, one finds a plethora of issues associated with the topic. If one is not careful, one can walk away satisfied or confused about the “facts” and the case studies, and not realize that the author(s) may not have provided an explicit definition of forgiveness. McCullough makes a similar observation, “Agreeing on what forgiveness is not does not necessarily mean that researchers agree on what forgiveness is” (McCullough et al., 2000, p. 8). However,

those conducting clinical empirical research tend to offer explicit and concise definitions of forgiveness, since their research approach is dependent upon an explicit definition. Given the various definitions and understanding, it is beneficial to survey the major contemporary efforts in the field of forgiveness being produced predominately from the Christian community. Three different perspectives were surveyed: (1) an empirical research perspective—which includes works from clinical psychology, (2) a more general Christian counseling perspective—which includes works from pastoral care, along with works from pastoral ministry and church tradition, and (3) a theological and philosophical perspective—which includes works from pastoral theology and philosophy. The aim of this survey is not to provide a comparative analysis of these three different perspectives, but rather to assess what is being written about forgiveness within these disciplines. The information drawn from these sources is organized around twelve major questions associated with the issue of forgiveness, with the final discussion being a presentation of the diverse definitions of forgiveness found in the literature.

### **A Survey of the Major Issues of Forgiveness**

The 1999 Barna survey focuses on five predominant myths associated with forgiveness. In the section that follows, a more in-depth presentation will offer seven additional issues to consider as one tries to understand the complexity of forgiveness as reported in the literature. The purpose of this survey is to present a detailed analysis of the major issues of forgiveness. Such detail is necessary due to the complexity of the topic and the inter-relatedness of the material. Presenting a host of issues associated with forgiveness before providing the various definitions of forgiveness offered in the literature may seem backward; however, it is hoped that at the conclusion of this extensive survey, the need for a theocentric definition of forgiveness will be evident.

### ***What Is Unforgiveness?***

Unforgiveness, an unwillingness to forgive, is understood in terms of three

broad categories: (1) unforgiveness understood as a set of emotions, (2) unforgiveness understood as cognitive activity, and (3) unforgiveness viewed as sin. These areas of understanding are not mutually exclusive.

### **Unforgiveness Is a Set of Emotions**

Unforgiveness is often associated with delayed, negative emotions.

Immediately following an offense, the “hot” emotions of anger and fear predominate. As time passes, one begins to replay the incident repeatedly. Rumination transforms the fear and anger into the delayed “cold” emotions of unforgiveness—bitterness, resentment, and hatred, along with the residual anger and fear (Worthington, 2001a). Researchers differ in opinion as to which are the critical emotions associated with unforgiveness. Some contend that the cold emotions of hatred, bitterness (Augsburger, 1988; Worthington, 2001a, 2003), and shame (Patton, 2000; Shults & Sandage, 2003) are at the core of unforgiveness. Other clinicians posit that the hot emotions of anger (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Enright, 2001; Worthington, 2001a, 2003) and fear (Worthington, 2003; Cunningham, 1985) are the decisive emotions associated with unforgiveness. In spite of their detrimental impact, Worthington (2001) asserts that emotions associated with unforgiveness actually serve as motivators to move one towards forgiveness.

Enright specifies that the anger associated with unforgiveness is characterized by: “anger that is directed toward a person or other people, not to ‘fate,’ circumstances, or inanimate objects; anger that is caused by a real injustice; anger that has become a pattern that is not easily broken; anger that causes you to engage in self-destructive behaviors” (2001, p. 50). Enright (2001) asserts that anger is the symptom of unforgiveness, while injustice is the cause. Smedes (1996) carefully makes a distinction between anger and hate. He contends that hate, not anger, is the antithesis of forgiveness, since hate is directed at the person, whereas anger is directed at the action of the offender. He adds, “Anger keeps bad things from happening again to you. Hate wants bad things to happen

to him. Anger is the positive power that pushes us toward justice. Hate, by that token, is the negative force that pushes us toward vengeance. Anger is one of love's good servants. Hate serves nobody well" (1996, p. 167). This dichotomy between forgiveness and hate is illustrated in an account offered by Sandage (2003):

One abuse survivor who fervently resisted forgiving others, even people he cared about, explained to me, "Hate is all I've got!" What he meant was that he had learned early in life that hate was his only defense against the massive psychological pain of being physically abused by those he trusted most in life—his parents. Hate helped him form a self-protective armor and fueled his determination to survive his family battleground. In relying on such hate he could not afford to empathize or take the perspective of others, which is quite understandable given his early life context. (p. 59)

### **Unforgiveness as a Cognitive Activity**

There are many in the field who understand unforgiveness as a cognitive and volitional activity. Unforgiveness can be seen as cognitive resistance to forgiveness. Reasons for resisting forgiveness vary: a fear of not knowing what might happen, appearing weak, or that injustice will prevail (Cunningham, 1985; Exline & Baumeister, 2000); an unwillingness in acknowledging hurt (Enright, 2001); the pain of unhealed wounds (Patton, 2000); and the loss of "victim status" (Exline & Baumeister, 2000, p. 147). The last reason for resistance to forgiveness requires elaboration. Despite sounding insensitive, some victims resist forgiving because of the perceived loss of "power" they might have over the offender in seeking punishment or reparation, loss of justification for any wrongful behavioral or emotional responses, and a loss of support and sympathy (Exline & Baumeister, 2000). As a result of resistance to forgiveness, little growth results from the trial. DiBlasio understands unforgiveness as the result of both cognitive and emotional energy that is "misdirected" into resentment. Given the erroneously guided energy, unforgiveness becomes a "second order dysfunction" (DiBlasio, 2002, p. 6) that overlays the hurt from the original offense, thus complicating the interpersonal dilemma (Smedes, 1996).

Most researchers and clinicians in the field acknowledge the cognitive aspect

of unforgiveness as they discuss the dynamics of forgiveness. There are many cognitive dynamics involved in unforgiveness: negative and vengeful thoughts about the offense and the offender (Augsburger, 1988; DiBlasio, 1999; Enright, 2001; Hargrave, 1994; McCullough, 2001; Shults & Sandage, 2003; Smedes, 1996; Worthington, 2001a, 2003); painful memories and an inability to find meaning in the suffering (Augsburger, 1988; Cunningham, 1992; DiBlasio, 1999; Enright, 2001; Patton, 2000; Shults & Sandage, 2003); self-righteous comparisons with the perpetrator, rooted in pride and self-centered thinking (Cunningham, 1985; Patton, 1985, 2000; Smedes, 1996; Worthington, 2001a, 2003); introspective thoughts associated with a shameful identity, shaped by the hurtful experiences of the past (Patton, 2000); and the actual decision, or unwillingness, not to forgive. Based on these findings, researchers cite injustice (Enright, 2001) and shame (Patton, 2000; Shults & Sandage, 2003) as root causes for unforgiveness.

### **Unforgiveness as a Sin**

The majority of discussion about unforgiveness does not extend beyond the issues of delayed negative emotions or hurtful cognitions. DiBlasio (1999) is perhaps the lone voice who intentionally places unforgiveness primarily within the context of sinful emotions and cognitions. Cunningham (1985) implicitly alludes to the sin associated with unforgiveness: “We know a lot more about the need for forgiveness than we know about the power to forgive. Perhaps that’s because many of us know more about our kinship with Adam and Eve than we may know about our kinship with Christ” (1985, p. 141). Unforgiveness as sin is discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.

### **Reflections on Unforgiveness**

A right understanding of unforgiveness is imperative, since it will have a direct impact on the direction one takes to help another move towards forgiveness. The research information describing the emotional and cognitive aspects of unforgiveness is helpful in understanding the struggles of the heart in bondage to unforgiveness. The

dynamics and implications of unforgiveness are considerable and must be carefully deliberated and explained in any model of forgiveness.

### *Is Forgiveness Optional?*

Another crucial concept to grasp is whether forgiveness is optional and if so, are there certain offenses which are too horrendous to forgive? The basic issue has only two positions—either forgiveness is optional or it is not. If forgiveness is optional, what are the conditions and circumstances for forgiveness? If forgiveness is not optional, then is it merely a moral duty or a religious virtue? These and other questions are surveyed.

### **Forgiveness Is Optional**

Some noteworthy clinicians contend that forgiveness is optional. Enright (2001) emphatically states that one is not morally obligated to forgive or extend mercy, but is obligated to be just and to do nothing that would harm others. He goes on to say that forgiveness is a choice—it is a free gift given to one in an undeserved fashion. Similarly, Smedes (1984) makes the point that no one can be forced to forgive or forgive out of moralistic duty, yet Smedes does not explicitly state whether forgiveness is optional. Patton asserts “one does not have to forgive” (2000, p. 294), as he contends the life of faith is a continual discovery and rediscovery of God’s grace—implying that one has freedom under such grace. He adds that one should not encourage or insist that others forgive, but should journey with them, providing a relational context that serves to reduce the shame and rejection experienced by the offense, thus enabling them to discover the forgiveness of others. Finally, there are a small number of contributors in the field whose position is uncertain whether forgiveness is optional (McCullough et al., 2000; Shults & Sandage, 2003).

### **Are Some Offenders and Offenses Unforgivable?**

The 1999 Barna survey (Jeffress, 2000) showed that 50% of respondents

believed some offenses are not forgivable. Even though Enright (2001) maintains that forgiveness is a choice, he contends that any offender can be forgiven, irrespective of repentance or remorse. Smedes (1996) states “intolerable” offenses can be forgiven and the offender’s fallible nature does not make even the most dreadful offense unforgivable. Most others in the field hold the position that forgiveness is possible, regardless of the nature or severity of the offense (Augsburger, 1988; DiBlasio, 1999; Jones, 1995; Worthington, 2001a, 2003).

### **Forgiveness Is Not Optional**

The obligatory nature of forgiveness is presented explicitly, implicitly, or not at all in the literature. Those in the field who posit that forgiveness is imperative, base their position on God’s commandments that His children forgive one another (Adams, 1989; Augsburger, 1988; DiBlasio, 1999; Worthington, 2003). Within this camp, diverging views emerge on the conditionality of forgiveness. In other words, the question “if” one should forgive does not arise, but “when” and “under what conditions” should one forgive another. These questions are addressed in the following sections. Moreover, others in the field view forgiveness as a requirement to live the Christian life, even though they do not explicitly state the compulsory aspect of interpersonal forgiveness (Cunningham, 1985; Hargrave, 1994; Hong, 1984; Jones, 1995).

### **Reflections on Forgiveness As an Option**

The question of whether interpersonal forgiveness is optional appears to be a straight forward issue. Those who contend that forgiveness is a choice support their rationale on the issue of human freedom and the notion that forgiveness cannot be “legislated.” Those who posit that forgiveness is not optional for interpersonal transgressions, rest their case on the commandment of God to forgive, and the idea that forgiveness is consistent with the Christian life. Most contributors in the field assert it is possible to forgive another, regardless of the offense.

### *What Are the Motives Associated with Forgiveness?*

In surveying the literature, the broad range of reasons or motives to forgive arise chiefly from a humanistic viewpoint and focus primarily on the welfare of the forgiver, and to a lesser degree, on the welfare of the one who is forgiven. Research reports the tangible benefits of forgiveness, across generations (Hargrave, 1994; Krause, 2003; Worthington, 2004), across gender lines (Shackelford, Buss, & Bennett, 2002), and across societies and cultures (Worthington, 2001b; Worthington & Berry, 2004; Sandage, Hill, & Vang, 2003). Since the need for forgiveness arises from a relational context, the motives are presented in relational terms—for oneself, for one's relationship with the other, and for one's relationship with God.

#### **Forgive for Oneself**

The forgiveness literature focuses primarily on the one who has been offended, hurt, and/or abused by another. Therefore, the emphasis of such works is therapeutic—“freeing,” “healing,” or “restoring” the one faced with the decision to forgive. A therapeutic emphasis, which is critiqued by some in the field as self-centered or self-seeking, rightfully addresses grief, pain, and brokenness accompanying a relational offense. On the one hand, to deny the pain of the person who experiences emotional and/or physical injury is neither merciful nor loving. Yet, to focus solely on the “victim” can be just as harmful. Nevertheless, any credible model of forgiveness must take one's personal injury seriously.

In the field, forgiveness is regarded as a proven phenomenon that yields an improvement in the overall health and well-being of those who forgive (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Enright, 2001; Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Fitzgibbons, 1998; McGee & Sapaugh, 1996; Worthington & Schurer, 2004). The benefits associated with forgiveness generally fall into two broad areas—psychological and physiological. There are a vast number of psychological benefits associated with forgiving, ranging from the release of bitterness, resentment, and hate towards the offender, to releasing one from the

shame of the offense (Hargrave, 1994; Krause & Ellison, 2003). A change in self-identity is another psychological benefit for the forgiver. One can move away from victimization, gaining fresh insight into one's own identity as a result of finding meaning and purpose in the suffering (Enright, 2001; Jones, 1995; Patton, 2000; Shults & Sandage, 2003; Smedes, 1984; Worthington, 2003). Moreover, there is growing evidence of the physiological benefits linked with forgiveness (McCullough, Pargament, & Thorensen, 2000). Even though several multifactor studies have shown a correlation between forgiveness and improved physical well-being, such as "cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, hypertension, cancer, and other psychosomatic illness" (Thomas, 2000, p. 38), there have been no controlled studies done to date that show that these benefits are caused by forgiveness (Thorensen, Harris, & Luskin, 2000).

### **Forgive for One's Relationship with the Other**

Forgiveness can also be motivated by the care for the other person involved in the relational offense. This other-centered motive to forgive emerges from a growing empathetic perspective of the offender as a valuable human being, who has his own story and struggles (Augsburger, 1988; DiBlasio, 1999; Enright, 2001; Hargrave, 1994; McCullough, 2001; Shults & Sandage, 2003; Smedes, 1984; Worthington, 2001a, 2003). If a relationship existed before the offense, the value of the relationship can serve as a motivating factor in the forgiveness and possible reconciliation between the two people involved (Augsburger, 1988, 1996; DiBlasio, 1999; Enright, 2001; Hargrave, 1994; Worthington, 2001a, 2003). A selfless motive can also be involved as the offended deals with the offender. A genuine sense of care and concern can develop for the well-being of the other. Worthington refers to this movement towards the other as an "other-oriented love" (Worthington, 2003, p. 120), an altruistic gift meant to bless the other, even though such a gift is undeserved (Adams, 1989; Enright, 2001; Worthington, 2001a, 2003). Offering and receiving the grace of forgiveness not only brings about a change in the

heart of the offended, but can also change the heart of the offender (Enright & Gassin, 1992).

### **Forgive for One's Relationship with God**

This last relational motive is artificially separated from the discussion on “forgiveness for oneself” and “for one's relationship with others” since a Christian cannot separate life from God. Many researchers in the field make some reference to God in their work; however, only those who place one's relationship with God as a central motive will be included.

With regard to one's relationship with God, the primary motive for forgiveness is to live in obedience to God and His will (Adams, 1989; DiBlasio, 1999; Hong, 1984; Jones, 1995; Worthington, 2003). Another significant motive in the activity of forgiveness deals with the virtuous or spiritual changes that take place in the forgiver (Allender, 1999b; Cunningham, 1985; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Jones, 1995; Pargament & Rye, 1998; Smedes, 1984; Worthington, 2001a, 2003). Personal growth follows forgiveness—the character of the forgiver is enriched through a deepened faith and joy in God. Living a life of forgiveness is a “journey towards holiness” (Jones, 1995, p. 149).

### **Reflections on the Motives for Forgiveness**

As one thinks about the motives to forgive, one quickly recognizes at least two things. First, these motives can be thought of as benefits, and second, when one has been hurt, offended, or abused, one is not apt to consider these motives initially, due to struggles with grief and emotion associated with unforgiveness. Any model of forgiveness should incorporate motives from each of these three areas; however, the primary motive to forgive in a theocentric model is associated with one's relationship with God.

### *What Are the Necessary Virtues for Forgiving Another?*

Across the field, there is little variation in findings related to the factors or virtues that facilitate forgiveness. Of course, researchers and clinicians stress the characteristics in varying degrees; however, as one surveys the literature, one is able to see trends and patterns. The characteristics found in those who are able to forgive are empathy (Augsburger, 1988; DiBlasio, 1999; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Hampton, 1988; McCullough, 2000; McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997, 1998; Roberts, 1995; Shults & Sandage, 2003; Smedes, 1996; Worthington, 2001a, 2003), humility (Cunningham, 1985; Roberts, 1995; Shults & Sandage, 2003; Worthington, 2001a, 2003), a sense of other-oriented love (Augsburger, 1988; Enright, 2001; Hong, 1984; Jones, 1995; Smedes, 1984; Worthington, 2001a, 2003), and the ability to accept, and to even absorb the pain (Augsburger, 1988; Bergin, 1988; Enright, 1996, 2001; Glassin & Enright, 1995; Kierkegaard, 1849/1946; Smedes, 1996; Worthington, 2003). Aside from these virtues, Sandage (2004) and Augsburger (1996) also incorporate the differentiation of self as an essential characteristic for forgiveness.

#### **Empathy**

Empathy is crucial for moving from unforgiveness to forgiveness. Empathy is the ability to feel and to understand another—as a person who is also made in the image of God, therefore having inherent worth; as a person with her own struggles and life story, who is not defined by her behavior or actions. Empathy is a first step in overcoming the *injustice gap* as termed by Worthington (2003, pp. 49-50) or the *magnitude gap* as identified by Baumeister (2001). These terms describe essentially the same phenomena—the offender tends to see the level of injustice or the severity of the offense in greater proportions than the perpetrator. If these gaps are not overcome, several scenarios could result: (1) the *victim* and the *perpetrator* get into a perpetual cycle of back-and-forth hurt, (2) the offended one is unable to separate the offender from his/her actions and sees the other as evil, and (3) the one hurt develops an inaccurate

identity characterized by insignificance, inadequacy, and/or victimization. Developing empathy towards the offender is a decisive step in overcoming the injustice or magnitude gap. Yet empathy alone does not lead to forgiveness—humility is also required (Worthington, 2001a).

### **Humility**

Empathy enables the offended to see the offender realistically. Humility enables one to see oneself objectively. Humility and empathy are dynamically integrated in the process of forgiveness (Cunningham, 1985). Sandage defines humility as “the capacity to overcome shame by facing oneself non-defensively and facing others redemptively” (2003, p. 58). As one acknowledges the need for forgiveness, the walls of self-righteousness, self-protection, and judgment begin to dissolve and humility emerges. The width of the injustice gap shrinks and new perspectives about life, the offense, and the other begin to develop. Worthington adds a different dimension to humility; he describes it as “other-oriented” gratitude—grateful for others, for what they have done, and for who they are (2003, p. 126). According to Worthington (2003), this gratitude leads to other-centered love. Empathy and humility, truly relational virtues, pave the way for the ultimate virtue between any two people—love.

### **Other-Centered Love**

Forgiveness is difficult enough; loving the offender seems out of the question. Where would one find the resource or motive to move towards the offender in love? Many contributors in the field present love as an integral part of the forgiveness process. This “other-oriented” love is simply described as the biblical *agape* love (Worthington, 2003). Worthington and Enright are two researchers who place substantial emphasis on the relationship between forgiveness and love. In fact, Worthington (2003) describes forgiveness and justice as twin edges of the sword of love, and he points out that Jesus taught that the law is embodied in God’s two-fold commandment to love, with love being

the “central Christian emotion” (2003, p. 63). Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) philosophically describe this other-centered love found in forgiveness as moral love. Moral love is noted for its care and concern for the other, regardless of what the other has done or not done. Smedes succinctly states that “forgiving is love’s toughest work, and love’s biggest risk . . . [and] is love’s power to break nature’s rule” (1984, p. xii). Allender’s (1999a) belief that love soberly realizes one’s own sins as greater than the sins of the other is a unifying thought concerning empathy, humility, and other-centered love—this concept leads to the next, more difficult virtue associated with forgiveness.

### **Ability to Absorb the Pain**

A small number of researchers and clinicians highlight a key, yet unusual and counter intuitive characteristic found in those who are able to forgive—the ability to absorb pain. The ability to accept or absorb the pain of sin is at the heart of forgiveness (Augsburger, 1988; Enright, 1996), since it involves the ability to deal with the pain in a way that it will not be passed on to anyone else (Gassin & Enright, 1995). In his theory of family systems, Bergin suggests that one can either reflect the sins received from others or absorb the sins without transferring it to the next generation. In an even more striking statement, Bergin explains that one who is able to absorb the pain for the sake of others can serve as a “healer” or “redeemer” within one’s family system (Richards & Bergin, 2002, p. 213). A direct parallel can be drawn between this “transitional person” in the family system and the substitutionary role of Jesus Christ (Richards & Bergin, 2002, p. 213). Enright couples this concept of pain absorption with moral love as he asserts that one may need to suffer the pain from another for the “greater good” of the offender (Enright, 2001, p. 224). By no means is Bergin or Enright suggesting that anyone blindly and inhumanely subject himself to abuse. Smedes makes this point well, “Forgiving may enable us to bear up under and even to surmount intolerable abuse that people do to us when we cannot escape it. But it can never, should never,

shall never, transform intolerable wrong into tolerable pain” (Smedes, 1996, p. 155).

### **Reflections on the Necessary Virtues for Forgiving Another**

For the one who has been deeply hurt by another, these virtues—empathy, humility, other-centered love, and the ability to absorb pain—are the last thing one would consider, let alone remember. Each of these traits is contrary to human nature, especially in the midst of brokenness and pain. But the unanimity amongst those in the field for these virtues, especially for empathy and humility, is interesting. Those who support these virtues trail off when an other-centered love is considered and the number of advocates drop off considerably when dealing with the notion of finding meaning in suffering in general, and absorbing the pain in particular.

### ***Is Forgiveness Conditional?***

Another aspect of forgiveness which seems to be debated more in the pastoral realm than among the researchers is whether forgiveness is conditional. In other words, is it necessary for the offender to repent, to be remorseful, and to ask for forgiveness before the offended can grant forgiveness? To put it simply, does forgiveness depend on the actions or the attitude of the one who needs forgiveness? The 1999 Barna survey (Jeffress, 2000) reported that over 6 out of 10 people stated they either strongly agreed or tended to believe the myth that forgiveness is conditional.

### **Forgiveness Is Conditional**

Jay Adams (1989), using the text in Matthew 18:15-20 regarding church discipline as the basis for his position, states emphatically that forgiveness is conditional—the offender must repent before the offended can forgive. Adams’ position, echoed by Donald Whitney (2002), falls in line with much of church tradition. John Murray (1982) and John Calvin (1996a) draw the same conclusion, using Luke 17:3 as their proof text. Craig Blomberg (1992) concludes that forgiveness should be withheld

until repentance, based on Matthew 18:15-20. John MacArthur (1998) provides a position allowing for both conditional and unconditional forgiveness, based on two different types of forgiveness. Those who support the conditionality of forgiveness often cite Matthew 18:15-20 as their proof text, despite the fact that this text is primarily dealing with church discipline and the restoration of a wayward believer, and does not necessarily serve as a paradigm for human forgiveness.

### **The Issue of Respect**

Moral philosophers (Lamb & Murphy, 2002; Murphy & Hampton, 1988; Neu, 2002) add another dimension to this particular discussion. These philosophers argue that to forgive before the offender repents or demonstrates some form of contrition, would be an act of condonation; however, to forgive the other, or to have a change of heart towards the offender after repentance, would not be condonation, since the offender has repudiated his actions. Furthermore, condonation does not respect the offender as a responsible, moral agent; whereas, a change of heart, in response to the offender's repentance, signifies moral respect (Hampton, 1988). This logical argument can be expanded by including the concepts of instrumental and intrinsic value of individuals (Hampton, 1988). For a fuller discussion on forgiveness and the intrinsic value of persons, see Holmgren's work (1993) by the same title. Augsburger also contends that repentance is a key component of forgiveness. He suggests that forgiveness may take place in the absence of repentance; however, "moral integrity" would also be missing, due to the denial of the moral wrong associated with the offender and the offense (1996, p. 16).

### **If Forgiveness Is Conditional, What Conditions Are Required?**

For those who hold to the conditionality of forgiveness, the prevailing prerequisite is for the offender to demonstrate true repentance and remorse for her

actions. However, in opposition to this position, Worthington (2001, 2003) asserts that mere mortals cannot rightly discern the hearts of others, only God can. Therefore, people should forgive without demanding repentance. Worthington adds that since he is unable to know his own motives, he is in no position to judge the motives of others.

In a more expansive approach, Enright (Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1994; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, 2001) developed six styles that represent the spectrum of conditions under which one will forgive another, based on a social-cognitive developmental model that is reflective of the Piagetian and Kohlbergian paradigms. The styles describe the array of conditions for forgiveness, which range from conditional to unconditional forgiveness: (1) revengeful forgiveness—forgiveness only after similar pain is returned upon the offender; (2) restitutive or compensational forgiveness—forgiveness occurs only after repayment is made or forgiveness is granted as a means to relieve the sense of guilt associated with unforgiveness; (3) expectational forgiveness—forgiveness motivated by social pressure; (4) lawful expectational forgiveness—forgiveness given by external laws or requirements; (5) forgiveness as social harmony—forgiveness as a means to bring about social, relational unity; and (6) forgiveness as love—unconditional forgiveness motivated by internal values and by genuine concern and care for the other. Enright concludes that true forgiveness, represented by style 6, is a “moral and unconditional act” motivated by love, “regardless of the circumstances” (2000, pp. 60-61).

Krause and Ellison (2003) offers words of caution about making forgiveness conditional, noting that additional hurt can be added above and beyond the hurt from the original offense: (1) “Expected requirements may not be performed by the offender, resulting in additional hurt,” (2) “the offender’s contrite actions may not meet the expectations of the one offended,” and (3) “the offended one may have ulterior motives in demanding the acts of contrition—‘wanting the other to suffer’ ” (p. 80).

## **Forgiveness Is Unconditional**

The overwhelming majority of the literature contends that forgiveness should not be conditional on the actions or attitude of the offender (Allender & Longman, 1992, 1999b; Cunningham, 1985; DiBlasio, 1999, 2000; Enright, 2001; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Hargrave, 1994—concerning exoneration; Hampton, 1988; Hong, 1984; Jones, 1995; North, 1998; Shults & Sandage, 2003; Smedes, 1984; Tracy, 1999; Worthington, 2003). There are two primary reasons why these researchers and clinicians hold this position: (1) The offended should not be held in bondage to unforgiveness and kept from healing based on the actions and attitude of the offender and (2) by forgiving unconditionally, the offended is able to move towards the offender in love, embodying mercy, humility, and grace, while having a redemptive and restorative vision for the other (Allender & Longman, 1992; Enright, 2001; Hong, 1984; Jones, 1995; Shults & Sandage, 2003).

Other pastoral writers assert that forgiveness is unconditional. Carson (2002) understands the competing tension between the position of conditional forgiveness requiring repentance, deduced from texts such as Luke 7:3-4 and Matthew 18:15-20, versus the position that forgiveness does not depend on the repentance, deduced from passages such as Colossians 3:13-14 and Acts 7:60. He concludes that on both sides, forgiveness should issue from the heart, regardless of the attitude or action of the offender, but reconciliation is a function of repentance. Kendall (2002) states unequivocally that those who demand repentance before forgiving are not following the example of Jesus Christ as seen in Luke 23:34. Stanley (1991) supports the position of unconditional forgiveness based on the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).

## **Reflections on the Conditionality of Forgiveness**

The issue regarding the conditionality of forgiveness benefits from answering several key questions: What is forgiveness? What is the overarching purpose or goal of

forgiveness? Is forgiveness an event or a process? Does forgiveness flow from the rigidity of the law, or does it flow from one's love for the Lawgiver, who has lavished grace upon grace upon those He has forgiven? These and other questions need to be answered within the context of Scripture in order to determine whether or not forgiveness is conditional. Closely related to the discussion of the conditionality of forgiveness is the issue of whether forgiveness is a process that can take place independent of the offender.

### *Is Forgiveness a Unilateral or Bilateral Process?*

The question of whether forgiveness solely involves the forgiver or both the forgiver and the one to be forgiven, can be restated simply—is forgiveness unilateral or bilateral? This particular issue is sandwiched between the relationship forgiveness has with repentance and reconciliation and gets to the very essence of understanding the definition and dynamics of forgiveness. There are four general positions offered in the literature: (1) Forgiveness is solely unilateral, or takes place only within the confines of the one forgiving. (2) Forgiveness is solely bilateral, requiring the dynamics between both forgiver and the one to be forgiven. (3) Forgiveness is sometimes unilateral and sometimes bilateral, depending on the circumstances. (4) Forgiveness is both unilateral and bilateral in all circumstances. A theorist's position is often identified by analyzing his explicit or implicit definition of forgiveness, or gleaned from the context of his overall approach to forgiveness. In some cases, a theorist's position may not be readily identifiable without taking an educated guess.

### **Forgiveness Is Unilateral**

The majority of researchers and clinicians in the field regard forgiveness as a unilateral process—an intrapersonal phenomenon (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Freedman, 1998; Hargrave, 1999; Smedes, 1996; Worthington, 2001a, 2003). The discussion about the intrapersonal nature of forgiveness is almost always coupled with the follow-up notion that reconciliation is bilateral, or interpersonal. This distinction

between forgiveness and reconciliation allows for the position that forgiveness can take place independent of the actions and attitude of the offender.

### **Forgiveness Is Bilateral**

Inherent in the Jewish notion of forgiveness is the process that takes place between the perpetrator and God, and the community (Dorff, 1998). Consequently, forgiveness was not understood as an internal, individual process but something that was interpersonal in nature. Augsburgers emphatically states that forgiveness is about the “interpersonal transformation of relationships” (1988, p. 9), “a mutual transaction from an interpersonal paradigm” (1996, p. 14). Jones (1995) is another writer who establishes his understanding of forgiveness within the context of community. Moreover, Lamb and Murphy (2002) contend that unilateral forgiveness may actually cause one to release one’s self-respect, may undermine the self-respect of the offender, and may denigrate the moral order.

### **Forgiveness Is Sometimes Unilateral, Sometimes Bilateral**

MacArthur (1998) has a unique approach in this area, which is attributed primarily to the way he offers two broad categories of offenses—those that do not require confrontation and those that do. For those offenses that do not require confrontation, he asserts that a unilateral, unconditional forgiveness should be exercised, whereas in the other case, where the spiritual welfare of the offender is at risk, one should employ a bilateral, conditional forgiveness, which requires confrontation according to the guidelines of Matthew 18:15-20. A more detailed description of MacArthur’s two categories of offenses is offered in the section dealing with the different types of forgiveness.

### **Forgiveness Is Bi-Dimensional**

McCullough contends that forgiveness “has a dual character”—intrapersonal in

processing, while interpersonal in context (2000, p. 9). Baumeister, Exline, and Sommer (1998) also understand forgiveness from two different dimensions: (1) the inner, intrapsychic realm, which includes the cognitive, emotional, and individual behavioral aspects of the person, and (2) the interpersonal realm, which includes the social or relational context within which forgiveness takes place. They propose four equations to explain their bi-dimensional understanding of forgiveness (1998, p. 85):

(1) Interpersonal Act + No Intrapsychic State = *Hollow Forgiveness*, (2) No Interpersonal Act + Intrapsychic State = *Silent Forgiveness*, (3) Interpersonal Act + Intrapsychic State = *Total Forgiveness*, and (4) No Interpersonal Act + No Intrapsychic = *No Forgiveness*.

These four scenarios seem to cover the broad possibilities that one encounters in human forgiveness. This bi-dimensional model also appears to bring together the two extreme positions of unilateral and bilateral approaches to forgiveness.

### **Reflections on the Laterality of Forgiveness**

The need for forgiveness arises out of a relational transgression of some sort. The preceding statement appears to indicate the necessity for forgiveness to take place interpersonally. However, as raised by the majority of the field, such an approach puts the offended at the mercy of the offender, thus increasing the likelihood of additional hurt. The complexity of this issue is attributed to several substantial possibilities: (1) an improper definition/understanding of forgiveness is being utilized; (2) the majority view of the field is a reflection of the individualistic mindset of Western contemporaries; (3) the tension is a result of utilizing presuppositions that are essentially humanistic and secular; and/or (4) the discussion has reached a level that is too intensely focused and would benefit from a more global perspective. Whatever the case may be, a right understanding of forgiveness must shed light on the aspects of laterality.

### ***What Is the Relationship between Forgiveness and Reconciliation?***

Examination of the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation presents two slightly nuanced perspectives. Most writers agree forgiveness does not guarantee reconciliation, and it is necessary for both the offended and the offender to do their part to bring about reconciliation. However, the distinction between the two perspectives lies in the emphasis placed on reconciliation as one of the purposes and goals of forgiveness. In other words, the two perspectives differ by the degree of passion and vision expressed in discussing the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation.

#### **A “Cautionary” Perspective**

Those who hold the first perspective spend more time emphasizing the differences between forgiveness and reconciliation, while cautiously reminding their audience that trust needs to be reestablished, and a true change of heart in the offender needs to occur. The implication of this understanding is that reconciliation depends primarily on the offender—his repentance and evidence of change. In fact, Worthington (2003) specifically states that reconciliation is not mandated in Scripture, unlike forgiveness. A significant number of those in the field can be placed in this first cautionary group (Enright, 2001; Roberts, 1995; Smedes, 1984; Worthington, 2001a).

#### **A “Passionate” Perspective**

Those who hold the second perspective spend more time emphasizing the close connection between forgiveness and reconciliation, while passionately helping their audience develop a vision for the restoration of broken relationships and community. Adams (1989) asserts that the divine model of salvation provides the key to understanding that reconciliation, the establishment of a renewed relationship, is the point of forgiveness. Allender proclaims, “The driving passion of a forgiving heart is to see, touch, taste, feel, and smell reconciliation” (1999b, p. 211). Augsburger states

unequivocally that forgiveness equals “acceptance with no exceptions”—(1) acceptance of the hurt received, (2) acceptance of the offender, and (3) acceptance of the consequential loss (1988, p. 29). More specifically, he asserts, “Reconstructing the relationship . . . is the real work of forgiveness” (1988, p. 43). Jones consistently and passionately writes, “A Christian account of forgiveness ought not simply or even primarily be focused on the absolution of guilt; rather, it ought to be focused on the reconciliation of brokenness, the restoration of communion—with God, with one another, and with the whole Creation” (1995, p. xii). Hampton (1988) does not exhibit the same passionate vision for reconciliation, but in her philosophical reasoning, she lays out the logical, moral argument that reconciliation should be a primary goal for forgiveness. Finally, Stanley (1991) understands reconciliation as the final step in the process of forgiveness.

### **Some Inevitable Scenarios**

Life and humans in relationships are unpredictable. When dealing with the connection between forgiveness and reconciliation, a model of forgiveness must be tested by some inevitable scenarios, which take into account the complexities of life: (1) A woman is able to forgive the rapist, who is her uncle, but reconciliation is out of the question. She has no desire to re-establish the relationship with the person, even though the uncle is repentant (Hampton, 1988); (2) A man is able to forgive the drunk driver who killed the man’s son, but there was no prior relationship between them; (3) A husband may forgive and is willing to reconcile with his wife for her adultery, yet she is not repentant and is not interested in reconciliation; (4) A daughter may forgive her father for the past, but the father is estranged or has since died. These cases do not cover all of the difficult scenarios, but they certainly add grit and reality to the discussion.

## **Reflections on Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

Why is it important to understand the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation? What are some of the core issues surrounding the issue of reconciliation? On paper, these two nuanced perspectives—cautionary view versus passionate view—may not seem significantly different, but something far more is at stake when dealing with broken trust, broken relationships, and broken community. Are there any transcendent principles and purposes involved that might shed light on this discussion? This writer contends that those passionate about reconciliation, as an aspect of forgiveness, are driven by a vision involving God and His glory.

### *Are There Different Types of Forgiveness?*

This question may seem irrelevant at first glance, but when one reviews the literature in the field, one quickly sees the need to digest and discern what various writers claim as truths about forgiveness. Perhaps the easiest way to present the material is to offer each of the positions, dividing them into two broad groups—empirical and clinical research and clinical works and pastoral works. After the information is summarized, the material will be organized into a coherent synthesis of this issue.

### **Empirical and Clinical Works**

Sandage and Shults (2003) offer three types of forgiveness—forensic, therapeutic, and redemptive. Forensic forgiveness is described as a type of legal, moralistic transaction that forgoes retributive justice based on a legal or personal decision. Forensic forgiveness is linked with the forensic view of salvation, which is negatively critiqued by the authors: “The deleterious effects of the dominance of legal metaphors in the Christian doctrine of salvation have nowhere been felt more deeply than in the understanding and practice of forgiveness” (2003, p. 103). Forensic forgiveness is also compared to “Boszormenyi-Nagy’s . . . language of ‘balancing the moral ledger’ of relational credits and debits” (2003, p. 21). Therapeutic forgiveness is the concept

implied by most modern psychotherapeutic works, with an emphasis on the benefits for the forgiver as she transforms negative emotions and motivations to positive emotions and motivations. Redemptive forgiveness has theological origins that can and should be integrated into both forensic and therapeutic forgiveness. This type of forgiveness is “manifesting and sharing redemptive grace,” and its meaning is derived from the Greek word, *charizomai*, used in the New Testament to connote forgiveness (2003, p. 24).

For many years, Worthington defined forgiveness as emotional replacement, similar to Sandage and Shults’ therapeutic forgiveness. However, in his work *Forgiving and Reconciling* (2003), he makes a distinction between emotional and decisional forgiveness. Decisional forgiveness is a volitional act—a decision to not carry out acts of revenge or avoidance—yet it does not change a person’s emotions towards the offender. Emotional forgiveness is a process that entails emotional replacement—“the emotional juxtaposition of positive other-oriented emotions against the negative unforgiveness” (2003, p. 53).

Augsburger offers two forms of forgiveness—negative and positive. Negative forgiveness takes form in four ways: “release from bitterness and hatred, freedom from guilt, liberation from a wrongful life-style, and remission of punishment” (1996, p. 20). Positive forgiveness is concisely described as “the regaining of the brother” as outlined in Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15 (1996, p. 20).

Baumeister, Exline, and Sommer (1998) offer three types of forgiveness based on their bi-dimensional model of forgiveness. Multiple combinations of both the intrapsychic and interpersonal dimensions of forgiveness, result in either: (1) hollow forgiveness—one offers outward, interpersonal acts of forgiveness, but with an inner, intrapsychic state of unforgiveness; (2) silent forgiveness—one is able to forgive intrapsychically, but offers no outward, interpersonal form of forgiveness; and (3) total forgiveness—one experiences an intrapsychic state of forgiveness while offering outward acts of interpersonal forgiveness. However, if no interpersonal acts of forgiveness are

offered, and one is still in an intrapsychic state of unforgiveness, then there is no forgiveness.

### **Pastoral Works**

Adams (1989) provides two types of forgiveness to deal with the issue of God's forgiveness of His people: (1) Judicial forgiveness is associated with one being justified by faith at the time of salvation—done once and for all, and (2) parental forgiveness addresses sins that are forgiven in the life of a believer—done on an ongoing basis as part of progressive sanctification. Adam's distinction focuses on one's relationship with God and does not directly apply to human forgiveness.

MacArthur (1998) presents two types of forgiveness based on the nature of the offense: (1) Unconditional-unilateral forgiveness is to be granted for those offenses that are petty or unintentional, and falls under the imperative found in Mark 11:25. (2) Conditional-bilateral forgiveness deals with offenses that indicate the spiritual welfare of the offender is at serious risk: "serious doctrinal error, moral failure, repeated instances of the same offense, sinful habits or destructive tendencies, or any other transgression that poses a serious danger to the offender's spiritual well-being" (130). This type of forgiveness requires confrontation, as patterned after Matthew 18:15-20. The essence of such forgiveness is found in passages that exhort the seeking and executing of justice (Exod 23:6; Deut 16:20; Isa 1:17; 59:15-16; Jer 22:3; Lam 3:35-36). Confrontational forgiveness should also be employed if a scandalous offense results in disunity, heresy, or defilement within the body of Christ.

### **A Synthesis of the Different Types of Forgiveness**

The various types of forgiveness can be categorized either under the process dynamics of forgiveness or under the goals of forgiveness. First, the process of forgiveness requires many considerations—the nature of the offense may impact the way

one forgives (MacArthur, 1988—unconditional-unilateral or conditional-bilateral); the process dynamics may include both decisional (Shults & Sandage, 2003—forensic forgiveness; Worthington, 2003—decisional) and emotional activity (Shults & Sandage, 2003—therapeutic; Worthington, 2003—emotional replacement); and the dynamics involve dealing with negative thoughts and emotions (Augsburger, 1996—negative forgiveness; Worthington, 2003). Second, the goal of forgiveness deals with the redemptive or restorative interaction between the offended and the offender (Shults & Sandage, 2003—redemptive forgiveness; Augsburger, 1996—positive forgiveness that has the goal of regaining a brother or sister).

### **Reflections on the Different Types of Forgiveness**

The survey of the different types of forgiveness highlights the need for a comprehensive model to focus on both the process dynamics and the goals of forgiveness. Overall, it is encouraging that the assimilation of material does not reveal any substantial contradictions. Each contributor offers helpful insights for developing a psychology of forgiveness.

#### ***Should One Forgive God?***

A significant issue that inevitably surfaces in any discussion about human forgiveness is the concept of forgiving God. In the midst of deep anguish, the human soul cries out with questions dealing with the circumstances and the suffering: “Where was God when I was abused?” “If you say God was with me, why didn’t He protect me or keep it from happening?” “Is God able to help me?” The issue of forgiving God is found more regularly in the pastoral and Christian counseling works, with dissension arising from the more biblical and theological writings.

The concept of forgiving God is discussed throughout the forgiveness literature. The concept is generally discussed without substantive theological reasons,

but as a common course that can be taken by one who struggles to find freedom from unforgiveness. This aspect of forgiveness is straightforward—either one is encouraged to forgive God or not. But some have questioned the legitimacy of forgiving God.

### **One Should Forgive God**

A few prominent contributors to the field contend that one may find it necessary to forgive God. Worthington (2003) clarifies that God does no wrong, but consistent with his understanding of forgiveness, he asserts that one can decisionally and emotionally forgive God. Decisional forgiveness takes place when a person makes a conscious choice not to avoid or reject God, whereas a person emotionally forgives God when anger or resentment towards Him is released. Smedes offers a more ambiguous position as he states, “Would it bother God too much if we found our peace by forgiving him for the wrongs we suffer? What if we found a way to forgive him without blaming him? A special sort of forgiving for a special sort of relationship. Would he mind?” (1984, p. 83). Smedes’ statement reveals a human-centered motive—do what needs to be done so that one can be freed from psychological chaos. From the pastoral community, Kendall (2002) offers a reason for forgiving God:

What we ultimately believe is that God is to blame for our hurt. . . . For all of us who struggle with God's right to allow evil to exist in the world, there still must be a genuine forgiveness on our part, for any bitterness toward God grieves the Holy Spirit. We therefore must forgive Him—though He is not guilty—for allowing evil to touch our lives. (pp. 32-33)

Kendall suggests that one should forgive God “for allowing evil to touch [one’s] life.” In other words, one should forgive God for the bitterness and resentment that one has towards God, since most believe that He is ultimately responsible for one’s hurts. But there is deep ambiguity in this position. Even though Kendall affirms the sovereignty of God and the fact that God is not guilty of any wrongdoing, the notion of forgiving God seems to imply a degree of legitimacy in holding Him responsible for the evil to which one has been exposed. Is forgiving God the means to release the bitterness

one has towards God, or should one do the contrary and ask God for forgiveness?

### **One Should Not Forgive God**

There are three main reasons offered by those opposed to the concept of forgiving God. First, God is holy and cannot commit any moral wrongdoing; therefore, there is never a reason to forgive Him (Adams, 1989; Exline, 2004). Second, if one experiences a need to forgive God, then one is confused about God, His character, and His ways. Any false beliefs about God need to be challenged and changed (Cunningham, 1992). Third, to say one needs to forgive God is a form of “scapegoating” or wrongly directing blame to another (Augsburger, 1988). Such wrong blame is seen modeled by the first man, Adam, in the Garden of Eden, where he blamed both God and the woman for his sin against God (Gen 3:12).

### **Reflections on Forgiving God**

Overall, the issue of forgiving God is straightforward, as indicated by the two broad positions—God should be or should not be forgiven. Anger, confusion, and the desire to assign blame seem to be the impetus to forgive God. Most of those in the field who address this issue acknowledge God’s perfect holiness, therefore making the forgiveness of God an irrelevant and irreverent concept. Exline’s work (2004) on anger towards God provides insight in dealing with the relevant issues associated with the forgiveness of God. Exline (2004) identifies a correlation in the predictors for anger towards God with anger associated with interpersonal conflict. Individuals who experience unjust suffering, along with those who have certain dispositions—insecure attachment style, low self-esteem, and those who have a high sense of entitlement—have a higher likelihood of not only getting angry, but also angry against God. Overall, the concept of forgiving God results from people’s response to difficulties in life. Because of human nature, God is not exempt from the list of persons to be blamed.

### *The Issues of Timing Associated with Forgiveness*

Inherent in the discussion about interpersonal forgiveness is the issue of timing. Two main aspects are addressed in varying degrees in the literature: (1) when forgiveness should be introduced as an intervention in the counseling process, and (2) whether forgiveness is an event based on a cognitive decision or a process that mysteriously ends with a transformation of the offender's emotions. Both issues of timing are inter-related with the other aspects of forgiveness already discussed.

#### **When Should the Forgiveness Intervention Be Introduced?**

A general consensus in the field is that one should use sensitivity in employing forgiveness as an intervention. Some of the general concerns associated with introducing forgiveness to the offender include the following: (1) The person might feel coerced into producing an insincere or cheap forgiveness which may be used to avoid the conflict and/or the pain, or to manipulate the offender (Smedes, 1996); (2) the person needs adequate time to work through his/her emotions, which often include anger and grief associated with the suffering, or else suppressed emotions may resurface at a later time, resulting in additional relational conflict (Enright, 2001; Holmgren, 2002; McCullough & Worthington, 1994; Murphy & Hampton, 1988; Pargament & Rye, 1998; Richards & Bergin, 2002); and (3) premature forgiveness might lead to further victimization and possible delay in healing (Holmgren, 2002; Murphy, 2002; Richards & Bergin, 2002).

DiBlasio (1999, 2000, 2002), a lone, but influential voice in the field of forgiveness, advocates that the concept of forgiveness be introduced early in the counseling process. DiBlasio provides several reasons to support his radical approach: (1) He understands forgiveness as a cognitive, act of the will which is not determined by emotions; (2) by the time a counselee comes for counseling, more than likely, an individual has been struggling with unforgiveness for months and is looking for a way to get out of the bondage of bitterness; (3) by offering forgiveness as an immediate goal for

counseling, the counselee is given a choice as to what direction to pursue, as opposed to the therapist “limiting the self-determination” of the counselee (2000, p. 157); and (4) the counselor may intentionally or unintentionally hinder the work of the Holy Spirit, as well as serve a duplicitous role in perpetuating one’s sin of unforgiveness. DiBlasio’s (1999) last point highlights the critical need to operate from a God-centered, biblical perspective; otherwise, the counselor’s duplicitous role in perpetuating sin would not be identified.

As a caveat to the issue of timing, circumstances can command a sense of urgency for the one who needs to forgive. Situations involving unreconciled relationships in the face of impending death can heighten one’s desire to grant forgiveness or one’s desire to ask for forgiveness. Rabbi Charles Klein refers to these strategic opportunities as “transforming moments” (Enright 2001, p. 209).

At the other end of the time spectrum, there is equal concern for delaying forgiveness. The main concern for putting off forgiveness is the bitterness, resentment, and avoidance that inevitably take root in the heart of the offended (Augsburger, 1988; Smedes, 1996). Research confirms the fact that prolonged rumination about the offense and the offender further entrenches unforgiveness (Root, McCullough, & Bono, 2004; Berry, Worthington, O’Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2004). Guidelines for introducing forgiveness within the counseling process will be discussed in chapter 4.

### **Is Forgiveness an Event or a Process?**

There is a more fundamental question related to the timing of forgiveness—is forgiveness an event or a process accomplished over a period of time? The majority in the field contend that forgiveness is a process involving the transformation of emotions, volitions, and actions (Augsburger, 1998; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Enright, 2001; McCullough, 2000; Shults & Sandage, 2003; Smedes, 1984, 1996; Worthington, 2002, 2003). Time is needed to work through the emotions, to gain a different perspective on the offense and the offender, and to work towards the release of the emotions and

thoughts associated with unforgiveness. A spectrum exists among those who hold the position that forgiveness is a process that takes place over time. On the one end, researchers such as Worthington and Enright have developed a multiple step, deliberate process to assist one to move from unforgiveness to forgiveness. On the other end, clinicians such as Smedes (1984, 1996) offer a more amorphous description of the process of forgiveness, leaving the impression that forgiveness is more mysterious and abstract than a definitive experience. The following quote from Smedes (1984) serves as a good example of the more nebulous description of the forgiveness process:

Sometimes you struggle with it so long that you cannot remember the moment you finally did it; you just wake up one day and, on thinking about those you want to forgive, are a little shocked to realize you have already begun to forgive them. You know it because you find yourself wishing them well. . . . Sometimes you seem to slide into forgiving, hardly noticing when you began to move or when you arrived. (pp. 95-96)

Consistent with his understanding of forgiveness, DiBlasio describes forgiveness as a decision-based event, “a choice to let go of unforgiveness” (1999, p. 253), which is the result of a deliberate act of the will (DiBlasio, 1999; MacArthur, 1998; Stanley, 1991). DiBlasio (2000) concedes that even though one can decide to forgive at anytime, it may take time for hurtful memories and painful emotions to dissipate. DiBlasio even uses an argument analogous to Rabbi Klein’s transforming moments to point to the reality of deliberate, decision-based forgiveness.

Worthington’s (2003) more recent proposal acknowledges two types of forgiveness—decisional and emotional, which implies that forgiveness is both an event and a process. Forgiveness can be understood as an event, since one can willfully decide to forgive another. Forgiveness can also be understood as a process associated with the replacement of emotions, an emphasis Worthington has focused upon in his research up to his recent work *Forgiving and Reconciling* (2003). Worthington’s two distinct ways to forgive is consistent with Baumeister, Exline, and Sommer’s (1998) two dimensional model of forgiveness, which contends that one should forgive both intrapsychically and

interpersonally. The interpersonal actions found in the bi-dimensional model are mirrored by Worthington's decisional forgiveness—a decision to forgive is manifested through one's outward behavior towards another, while the intrapsychic actions associated with the bi-dimensional model are mirrored by Worthington's emotional forgiveness—the emotions and inner thoughts towards the other may come later.

Breaking away from the linear spectrum of time, theorists and clinicians such as Jones (1995) and Patton (2000) understand forgiveness as neither an event, nor a process, but as a way of life centered upon a right relationship with God and others, as one strives for community. Forgiveness seen from this perspective propels the discussion of forgiveness onto a different trajectory.

### **Reflections on the Issues of Timing**

The timing aspects of forgiveness are relevant and essential to having a comprehensive and coherent understanding of forgiveness. Again, one's definition of forgiveness directly impacts how one addresses these two aspects of timing. First, regarding the timing of the forgiveness intervention, DiBlasio asserts by not properly addressing the issue of forgiveness in the counseling process, the counselor can condone unforgiveness. If one understands unforgiveness as a sin against God, then one's participation in assisting another in sin is serious. Furthermore, as one tries to understand the timing of the forgiveness intervention from a theological perspective (assuming unforgiveness as a sin), a critical tension develops between the emotional condition and the spiritual condition of the victim—which is more important? Can one's emotional and spiritual condition be considered separately? Second, regarding whether forgiveness is an event, a process, or a way of life reveals how one defines and understands forgiveness. Therefore, the definition of forgiveness is critical and the implications are significant and far-reaching—ultimately influencing how one relates to God and others.

### ***What Forgiveness Is Not***

Despite the divergent views of forgiveness, most in the field agree on what forgiveness is not (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). Several broad perspectives capture the consensual views of what forgive does not mean: (1) issues of legal justice, (2) issues of the offense and the offender, (3) relationship with reconciliation, (4) issues of memory and emotions, and (5) misconceptions of those involved in forgiveness.

#### **Issues of Legal Justice**

When forgiving, the offended does not *pardon* the offender in the legal sense of the word (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; McCullough et al., 2000). A legal pardon is executed within the justice system after the offense is brought before the court and a defense and cross-examination is conducted. In a full legal pardon, the judge “freely and unconditionally” absolves the offender “from all legal consequences, direct, and collateral, of crime and conviction” (Garner, 1990, p. 1113). In many cases, justice is sought, exercised, and experienced; however, with forgiveness, justice is neither the goal nor the result. Human forgiveness often takes place in private—whether between two individuals or within the soul of the forgiver. No judge is immediately involved, no jury is necessary, and legal issues like due punishment and leniency are not involved (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Kendall, 2002).

#### **Issues of the Offense and the Offender**

Forgiveness does not overlook or deal improperly with the offense. Forgiveness does not mean one *deny* that the offense took place or deny the wrongness of the action. Forgiveness does not mean one simply *excuses* the offense or the offender, either through rationalization, apathy, or negligent response. Forgiveness does not mean one *approves of* or *condones* the transgression, the motives behind the offense, or the values/character of the offender.

## **Relationship with Reconciliation**

Many researchers in the field agree that forgiveness is not the same as *reconciliation*. However, as seen in the section dealing with the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation, there is not a consensus regarding the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation. The core issues of laterality, intra/interpersonal dynamics, and overall definition of forgiveness all play a part in coming to a right understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation.

## **Issues of Memory and Emotions**

Sayings such as “you should forgive and forget” or “time heals all wounds” are commonly heard when discussing forgiveness. According to the 1999 Barna survey (Jeffress, 2000), approximately 66% of the respondents agreed that one should forget about the wrongdoing after forgiving the offender. Public opinion, however, is contrary to the research literature. The consensus in the field is that forgiveness should not be equated with forgetting the offense, the offender, or the pain. Rather, forgiveness makes way for one to look at the past from a different perspective. To pretend, or even to try to forget what happened, is not right for several reasons: (1) The painful occurrence is part of the past, a part of reality that cannot be changed; (2) the conscious thoughts and emotions will be at best suppressed, but this form of avoidance of life may lead to emotional and relational strife in the future; (3) the attempt to forget may also lead to condonation, which lessens the respect of both the offended and the offender as responsible moral agents (Hampton, 1988); and most significant (4) the attempt to forget as part of erasing the ugliness of the past takes away one’s ability to learn and to grow from the painful experiences of life.

The general notion that forgiveness means forgetting might originate from the interpretation of passages such as Psalms 25:7; 79:8, where the psalmist’s request for forgiveness of sins, and for the Lord not to remember his sins, are placed in parallel construction, thus making it easy to equate forgiveness with forgetting. One can draw a

similar conclusion from passages where God proclaims that He forgives the sins of His people for His namesake and that He remembers their sins no more (Isa 43:25; Jer 31:34).

Adams is one of the few who contend that one must forget when one forgives; however, his definition of “not remembering simply means not bringing a matter up to use it against another . . . and [one] won’t allow [oneself] to sit and brood over it either” (1989, p. 62). Augsburg states more directly that “forgetting is the result of complete forgiveness” (1988, p. 45); however, like Adams, he acknowledges that forgiveness does not erase the memory bank, but helps to lessen the painful emotions associated with the memories so one does not have to relive the hurtful past whenever the incident is recalled.

### **Misconceptions of Those Involved in Forgiveness**

Misunderstandings of forgiveness exist not only in the dynamics of forgiveness, or what forgiveness entails, but also with the perceived implications for those involved. Misconceptions can be held by a number of people affected by the offense—the offended, the offender, and the family and friends of those involved. A person may be hesitant to forgive or receive forgiveness for fear that he may be seen as weak, inferior, spineless, or insecure (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Lamb & Murphy, 2002). Such a fear may arise in the offended for not demanding justice and not taking revenge, and may arise in the offender for not standing up for his own rights as an individual, or for admitting to shameful behavior. Such erroneous beliefs about forgiveness are damaging for all involved and actually increase the layers of false thinking that will need rectification in order to work towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

### **Reflections on What Forgiveness Is Not**

After surveying what forgiveness is not, the essential issues that must be

addressed to develop a correct and comprehensive understanding of forgiveness emerge—the question of justice, the reality of the offense and the breach in the relationship, the memory and the emotions that have been impacted, the dignity and respect of all involved, and the issues associated with personal growth that can emerge from interpersonal calamity. Understanding that researchers agree on what forgiveness is not, can it be concluded that they agree on what forgiveness is? According to leaders in the field, there is no one definition that is agreed upon by all in the field (McCullough et al., 2000; Worthington, 1998). With this fact in mind, it is now time to survey the various ways in which forgiveness is understood in the current literature.

### *What is Forgiveness?*

As this section comes to a close, it is time to present a survey of the various definitions of forgiveness found in the current literature. Concise definitions are provided in cases where one was given; otherwise, a synthesis of the author's major points serve as a conceptual *definition*. Individual definitions were analyzed and then major points were extracted and distributed in seven broad, descriptive categories. This categorical approach is the most effective way to assimilate the major components of the various definitions of forgiveness so that patterns or themes can emerge. The following is a list of categories which are utilized to answer the question, "What is forgiveness?": (1) a change in emotions, (2) a cognitive change, (3) an act of the will, (4) a method of coping, (5) a cancellation of a debt, (6) a means to relational restoration and transformation, (7) a work of divine grace.

### **Forgiveness as a Change of Emotions**

Worthington most consistently advocates forgiveness as the emotional replacement of "hot emotions" or unforgiveness (also defined as an emotion) with "positive emotions" (Worthington, 2001a). Others have focused primarily on dealing with anger as the primary means to move away from unforgiveness and move towards

forgiveness (Enright 2000, 2001; Murphy, 1988). All in the field acknowledge the importance of the emotional aspect of forgiveness, but a number of researchers and clinicians place varying degrees of emphases on other aspects, as seen in the other categorical definitions.

### **Forgiveness as a Cognitive Change**

A substantial number of those in the field purport that forgiveness is the result of cognitive change. Within this broad category there are various definitions of cognitive change. Cunningham (1985) understands forgiveness as a process in which both feelings and thoughts about the offense and the offender are changed as a result of “reframing.” McCullough (2001, p. 194) uses the term “prosocial motivational change” towards the offender to describe forgiveness, a perspective utilized by Sandage and Shults (2003). Hampton (1988) defines forgiveness as a positive “change in perspective” towards the wrongdoer, a concept she equates to a change in heart. Both DiBlasio (1999, 2000, 2002) and Worthington (2003) contend that there are cognitive aspects to forgiveness, such as separating reason from feelings and letting go thoughts of revenge, before willfully deciding to forgive. Inherent to each of these understandings is the fact that forgiveness is a change in thought regarding the offense and the offender, while making room for reconciliation, regardless of the wrong suffered and the injustice experienced.

### **Forgiveness as an Act of the Will**

Closely related to the view of forgiveness as a cognitive change, is the view of forgiveness as an act of the will. This particular category, however, gives prominence to the function of cognition over emotions. This decision-based understanding reflects the position of a number of writers in the field. Adams (1989) describes forgiveness as a promise to not remember or bring up the transgression to the offender, others, or oneself. Others, including Adams and MacArthur (1998), incorporate the concept of willful obedience in their definition of forgiveness. DiBlasio (1999, 2000, 2002) asserts

forgiveness includes a separation of reason from feeling, followed by a willful decision. The concept of “letting go” thoughts of unforgiveness is a general way in which the forgiveness process is described (Diblasio, 1999, 2000, 2002; MacArthur, 1998). Hargrave employs the notion of specifically “giving up claims to the injustice” (1994, p. 79) while describing forgiveness as having a dual process of “letting go” and “putting back” (1999, p. 317). Stanley states that forgiveness is an act of “setting someone free from an obligation to you that is a result of a wrong done against you” (1991, p. 16), done in accordance to the will of the Father. Cunningham offers the notion of “willingness” as “the capacity to seek and live in harmony and union with the will of God” (1985, p. 147). Enright defines forgiveness as a moral, willful choice to “abandon resentment and related responses . . . and endeavor to respond to the wrongdoer based on the moral principle of beneficence” (2000, p. 24). Worthington’s decisional forgiveness also includes the notion of willfulness as he asserts that one “agrees to control [one’s] negative behavior,” while “changing [one’s] intention to act” (2003, pp. 41, 53). This particular category introduces some important considerations into the forgiveness equation which are discussed in the reflections at the end of this section.

### **Forgiveness as a Method of Coping**

Pargament and Rye (1998) describe forgiveness as a method of religious coping. They define coping as a way one attempts to find significance during the stressful times of life. They discuss two broad categories of coping—(1) conservation, where people attempt to maintain their original view of life and themselves in spite of the circumstances, and (2) transformation, where people adjust to the stressful situation of life by changing their views of themselves, their lives, or the things they seek. The means of conservational coping are generally anger, hurt, resentment, and fear with the end result being self-protection and justice. Transformational coping generally utilizes empathy, reframing, and re-examination to cope with the new realities of self, others, and

the world, which is always difficult. The end result of transformational coping is peace. Pargament and Rye suggest that forgiveness should be considered a form of transformational coping, utilizing the same means and achieving the same results as other forms of transformational coping.

### **Forgiveness as a Cancellation of a Debt**

A common definition of forgiveness is cancellation of a debt. When one experiences a wrongdoing at the hands of another, the offender becomes indebted to the offended for the injustice and the suffering. This concept has a more legal and transactional flavor than the other definitions of forgiveness. Many theorists in the field incorporate the notion of debt cancellation in their approach to forgiveness (Allender, 1999b; Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998; Hampton, 1988; MacArthur, 1998).

### **Forgiveness as a Means to Relational Restoration**

Despite the lines drawn between forgiveness and reconciliation in much of the literature, there are a number of prominent writers in and out of the field who ascribe a close connection between forgiveness and reconciliation. Allender writes that forgiveness is “hungering for restoration” while “revoking revenge” and “pursuing goodness” (1999b, p. 207). Augsburg states that forgiveness is about “the regaining of a sister or brother” (1988, p. 9), while Hong envisions a state of forgiveness “where citizens create a redemptive community” (1984, p. 17). Jones describes the embodiment of forgiveness as “a way of life in an ever-deepening friendship with the Triune God and others . . . [forgiveness] ought to be focused on the reconciliation of brokenness, the restoration of communion—with God, with one another, and with the whole Creation” (1995, p. xii). Hampton asserts that when one has a change of heart towards another in forgiveness, “one ‘reapproves’ of [the other], so that one is able to consider renewing an association with her” (1988, p. 83). Hargrave (1994) makes a distinction between

exoneration and forgiveness, with the latter resulting in the restoration of the relationship based on renewed sense of trust and love. Worthington's decisional forgiveness also includes the notion of reconciliation as he asserts that one moves to "restore [the] relationship to where it was before the transgression" (2003, p. 41). Finally, C. S. Lewis (1980) offers a definition of forgiveness that is inextricably tied to reconciliation:

Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it. That, and only that, is forgiveness, and that we can always have from God if we ask for it. (p. 124)

### **Forgiveness as a Work of Divine Grace**

Forgiveness can be understood as an integral part of the journey of sanctification, as a way of life, as opposed to an event, or even a series of events. God can use forgiveness as a means of sanctification, within the souls of the offended, the offender, and in the relationship between them. Ultimately, forgiveness can be seen as a means of grace in the battle against sin.

Forgiveness is a way of life. Hong (1984) describes forgiveness in terms of being "a spirit . . . a spirit of reconciliation," or "a state of condition . . . a state of forgiving love," in which all believers should live. Jones defines forgiveness as "a way of life, a pursuit of holiness versus an act or a mere process; (1) a way to unlearn patterns of sin, (2) to repent for specific sins, and (3) to foster habits of holy living" (1995, p. 49). Patton notes that forgiveness "is an important characteristic of a life lived in a right relationship with God and others" (2000, p. 281), while Smedes describes forgiveness as "a journey" (1984, p. 177). Pargament and Rye conclude that after a person copes with a stressful event, or phase of life, in a transformational manner, forgiveness becomes "a way of life" practiced with decreasing difficulty and heartache, and actually becomes a "religious value" (1998, p. 72).

Forgiveness is a means of sanctification. Cunningham explicitly states that the

process of forgiveness uses sin to bring a deepening understanding of one's own sinfulness, as well as a different basis for understanding "one's self and one's on-going relations to others under God" (1985, p. 143). Enright's reference to forgiveness producing a Christ-like transformation is not explicit, but implicit. He states that forgiveness affords one with an opportunity to find meaning in suffering and allows for a "newly emerging identity" (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, p. 7). He contends that because of the moral love involved, forgiving can bring about changes in both the one who forgives and the one forgiven (Enright & Gassin, 1992). Jones is consistent in keeping an eternal and divine vision for the purpose and the goal of forgiveness. Regarding transformation, he asserts "Christian forgiveness requires our death," putting off the old self, or denying the self as one embodies forgiveness and journeys "towards holiness" (1995, pp. 4, 66). He adds that one pursues holiness "in communion with God, one another, and the whole Creation," and in doing so, one will "unmask [one's] deception of [oneself], of others, and of the world through lives of forgiven-ness" (1995, p. 67). Stanley (1991) contends that one must view those whom one has forgiven as a means of obtaining a deeper understanding of God's grace. MacArthur asserts that forgiveness is a God-ordained means to cultivate and bring forth an increasing yield of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), and that "the act of forgiveness is the consummate expression of Christ-likeness" (1998, p. 92).

Forgiveness is a purposeful means of grace, seen as a proactive, redemptive measure, instead of something done merely in response to a wrongdoing. Allender calls forgiveness a redemptive "weapon of wisdom, designed to disrupt" sin and allure one with the goodness of God (1999b, p. 207). Sandage and Shults offer a definition of forgiveness based on the Greek word, *charizomai*: "the overarching meaning of forgiveness is manifesting and sharing redemptive grace" (2003, p. 23). MacArthur (1988) offers an understanding of forgiveness equivalent to spiritual warfare:

Satan's whole agenda is undermined by forgiveness. If forgiveness deflects

pride, shows mercy, restores joy, affirms mercy, proves obedience, and revitalizes fellowship, imagine how Satan must hate it! Therefore, forgiveness is an essential part of undoing Satan's schemes. (p. 179)

On a less forceful yet relevant note, Augsburg states that forgiveness “involves mutual repentance & redemption” (1988, p. 28), and is “a reversal of moral judgment” and “a reversal of moral attitude” (1996, pp. 11-12). When viewed in the light of redemption, forgiveness has a sense of powerful grace, a sense of divine purpose in a battle against sin and its consequences. This particular global perspective contrasts models which focus on the emotions and cognition of one struggling with unforgiveness.

### **Reflections on the Categorical Definition of Forgiveness**

One quickly surmises that one’s primary category of thought concerning forgiveness serves as a paradigmatic lens through which forgiveness is seen. Presuppositions determine how researchers understand the various aspects of forgiveness, the way they approach unforgiveness, the goals they set for forgiveness, and the way they determine if forgiveness has been achieved. This point is reiterated by Lamb as she notes “The central problem with definitions of forgiveness is not so much whether one theorist calls it the canceling of a debt and another a gift, but that these terms differ in their implications and are not always compatible” (2002, p. 7). Therefore, there is a critical need to define interpersonal forgiveness within a unifying context, a context which serves to eliminate dual or diverging meanings and implications.

Most contributors in the field agree with the reductionistic understanding that forgiveness involves affective, cognitive, and behavioral components (Enright & Gassin, 1992). Even if one moves to the more spiritual approaches, forgiveness can be understood as a transaction (canceling a debt), a duty (moral obligation), or a relational bridge (means to reconciliation). Each of these perspectives is helpful and highlights a certain detailed aspect of the forgiveness dynamic. Yet, the plethora of approaches and views begs the need for a coherent system that pulls all of these distinct aspects into a

unified model of forgiveness. A theocentric approach will be helpful in this regard. Forgiveness has to be first understood from God's perspective—how is it defined, what does it entail, what is the purpose, how is it demonstrated in Scripture, and what does He expect from His children regarding forgiveness?

***Reflections about the Survey of the  
Forgiveness Literature***

After sifting through the vast and deep issues associated with forgiveness, confusion and concern may emerge for some readers. Confusion may stem from trying to make sense of the divergent views within any one or all of the various aspects of forgiveness presented. Concern may emerge from thinking about the importance of having a right understanding of interpersonal forgiveness, knowing the critical role it plays in one's relationship with God and others. A valid sense of urgency emerges from the confusion and concern surrounding attempts to understand forgiveness. This sense of urgency prompts one to ask if there is a need for a new model of forgiveness, given the vast research and writing that already exists in the field.

**An Argument for a Theocentric Approach**

***Critique from within the Field***

Listening to what is being said by those within the field is the first step in addressing the question of whether a different model of forgiveness is necessary. Forgiveness researchers are genuinely interested in providing insight and guidance for those who have been hurt deeply by another; however, sincerity in effort does not necessarily equal correctness in understanding or approach. There are three broad critiques of the contemporary models of forgiveness. First, the presuppositions of the current models are primarily secular in context, thus leading to a primarily secular understanding. Second, given the modern psychological context, models of forgiveness are primarily therapeutic in approach. Third, to a lesser extent, there are some in the field

who question the validity of forgiveness as a therapeutic intervention, thus raising the issue of whether forgiveness can be clinically harmful.

### **Primarily Secular in Context**

Attempts to develop a secular approach to forgiveness which can be practice universally (Enright, 2001) is commendable, but runs the very real risk of distorting God's original purpose and weakens not only the understanding but also the application of forgiveness. DiBlasio (1999) warns that the current forgiveness research contains the very real danger of secularizing an issue with clear scriptural foundations. Jones echoes DiBlasio's point about context, asserting that the prevailing literature develops forgiveness in a context that excludes the communal or eschatological perspectives of Scripture and drifts away from its "Judeo-Christian roots" (1995, pp. 38-39). In his critique of definition drift within the field of forgiveness, Enright warns that contemporary definitions neglecting tradition distorts the true meaning of forgiveness (Enright et. al, 1998). McCullough et al. (2000) agree that there is insufficient research in how "religion" shapes people's "understanding and experience" of forgiveness (p. 10).

Those in the field also offer critiques about psychology from a more philosophical perspective. From an epistemological point of view, Glassin and Enright note that modern secular psychology is based on "empirical and phenomenological data, whereas Christianity is . . . based on divine revelation" (1995, p. 41). The extended quote from Pargament and Rye (1998) highlights the significant, fundamental differences in worldviews of modern psychology and religion:

At the risk of stereotyping, American psychology is largely a psychology of personal control (Pargament, 1997). As a profession, we have developed a number of ways to enhance our control over what is not controlled. Psychodynamic practitioners try to make the unconscious conscious. Behaviorists try to help people master the contingencies of their lives. Cognitive therapists teach people how to gain control over their thoughts and feelings. Wonderful advances have been achieved in many areas. But our field is less knowledgeable and helpful when it comes to the uncontrollable—when we face situations that are less amenable to further action, when we have to come to terms with fundamental human limitations. . . . Religion is more helpful here. Religion speaks a language unfamiliar to

psychology—fear, surrender, letting go, conversion, faith, finitude, suffering, meaning, hope—and, of course, forgiveness. These terms grow out of confrontation with the deepest crises of existence. They are terms that reflect our response to human frailty and mortality. (p. 75)

The religious language pointed out by Pargament and Rye is crucial in developing a deep, comprehensive, and real understanding of forgiveness. The perspectives of modern psychology and Christianity are worlds apart when one reflects on the “language barrier” that exists between the two. Jones draws the same conclusion as Pargament and Rye: the “psychological language” not only “[distorts] the grammar” of a Christian understanding of forgiveness, but also “[becomes] more powerful than the language and practice of the Gospel” (1995, p. 39).

### **Primarily Therapeutic in Approach**

The current forgiveness literature is also critiqued for being primarily therapeutic—focused on improving individual mental and emotional well-being. Specifically, a prevailing therapeutic worldview is seen in the consistent emphasis on the what seems to be “individual autonomy” over the balance of relational and communal aspects, to the point where some therapeutic models are characterized by approaches that “internalizes and privatizes” forgiveness (Jones, 1995, p. 39).

In his analysis concerning definition drift, Enright points out that the current trend of forgiveness literature places more emphasis on the personal benefits of forgiveness rather than the gift of forgiveness to both the forgiver and the forgiven (Enright, Freedman, & Risque, 1998b). In a rather direct and forceful manner, Augsburger (1988) states that:

The primary issue is not inner peace for oneself, not moral rightness with one's own conscience, not assurance of one's own salvation. These are self-centered, narcissistic goals that are only further evidence of the fact that one is still taking care of predominately one's own needs, not caring for the relationship or for the pain in the other.” (p. 23)

Augsburger's critique reflects his unwavering emphasis on mutual reconciliation between involved individuals. Again, one's presuppositions concerning

forgiveness—unilateral versus bilateral; forgiveness versus reconciliation, etc.—play a major role in the emphasis and application of the issues associated with forgiveness.

McCullough et al. (1997) take issue with Enright's developmental model of forgiveness, based on Kohlberg's model of moral development, stating that Kohlberg's theory is too individualistic. First, they contend that Kohlberg's theory, built on atheistic presuppositions, demonstrates, through empirical studies, an inherent bias against those defined as conservative and religious (Getz, 1984; Richards, 1991). Second, the moral development theory undermines transcendent authority, given that stage four—lawful expectations—is seen as a lower order development than stage six—internalized values. Third, the writers assert that Kohlberg's theory undermines community, given that stage three or four—social expectations—is seen as lower in moral development than stage six. Therefore, on these three counts, McCullough et al. (1997) highlights the pitfalls of utilizing Kohlberg's theory of moral development as a paradigm for a developmental model of forgiveness.

Neu (2002) questions whether forgiveness that is motivated by therapeutic reasons—to feel better or to free one from the bondage of unforgiveness—is even forgiveness at all. He continues by critiquing the notion of forgiveness as the only means of “closure” in order to get on with one's life, given that one is not typically overwhelmed with an isolated event, but “an interplay of attitudes” associated with the dynamics of other relationships found in one's life story (p. 26).

A related consequence of focusing primarily on the individual's struggle to forgive is to develop an approach to forgiveness that sees the offended as a victim. Jones posits the inevitable result of such an approach is to deal with forgiveness at the emotional level—how to overcome the “emotional will” in order to forgive one's offender (1995, p. 48). Jones adds that an individualistic and emotional approach to forgiveness tends to place little emphasis on the dynamics between forgiving and one's need for forgiveness.

### **Potential for Harm**

Few writers in the field have questioned the overall validity of forgiveness as an effective therapeutic intervention, given the growing number of studies reporting the multitude of benefits associated with forgiveness. However, a small segment of writers—namely philosophers and secular psychologists—question whether or not forgiveness is always the best intervention and if it does more harm than good (Lamb & Murphy, 2002). McCullough, Pargament, and Thorensen also note there is little research to determine if forgiveness can, in some cases, “lead to clinical harm” (McCullough et al., 2000, p.10).

### ***Primarily Cognitive in Approach.***

Lamb (2002) critiques the prevailing approach to forgiveness as being dominated by a cognitive-behavioral therapeutic paradigm. She notes that the overall influence of positive psychology over the past three decades supplants the humanistic psychologies of Maslow and Rogers, which results in a greater emphasis on cognitive changes to bring about changes in feelings and behavior versus valuing the experiential aspects of life—emotions (to include the negative emotions of anger and resentment) and self-discovery. Lamb’s bias is driven by her self-described “feminist psychology” and her humanistic philosophy (2002, p. 4). Neu (2002) questions if understanding is always necessary for one to forgive, as he confronts the adage, “to understand all is to forgive all.” Forgiveness takes place in some cases even with unexplainable circumstances, and in other cases, as a result of the repentance of the offender. Either way, forgiveness is achieved in spite of a complete understanding of the circumstances or even the motives of the offender.

### ***Issues of Self-Respect and the Moral Order.***

Both Lamb and Murphy (2002) voice their caution about uncritical and premature forgiveness for moralistic reasons. In speaking against a therapeutic approach

motivated primarily by “anxiety reduction” (Murphy, p. 42) or the “happiness” of the victim (Lamb, p. 9), forgiveness that does not fully face the reality and the seriousness of the offense, as well as demand the repentance of the offender, is not true forgiveness for three reasons. First, if a person forgives in order to avoid pain or simply to smooth over a relational issue, then she lessens her self-respect and takes on a position of servility. Second, forgiving unilaterally, without requiring repentance of the offender, implies the offender is not a responsible moral agent, thus lessening her self-respect. Third, when both the seriousness of the offense and the moral culpability of those involved are treated lightly, the moral order is affronted. Holmgren (2002) refutes each of Lamb and Murphy’s three points based on two presuppositions: (1) the offense is not about the self-worth of the one offended and (2) a person’s actions do not define who a person is—in other words, one’s actions and attitude can and should be separated from the worth of the individual.

### **Reflections on the Critiques within the Field**

The field of forgiveness is at a tenuous point in its development, given the significant philosophical critiques within its own ranks. Ignoring the critiques further hampers any efforts to develop a unified definition and understanding of forgiveness. A proper contextual understanding is of utmost importance when dealing with forgiveness. The divergent views presented in the survey are the result of studying forgiveness in a predominantly secular context. Any treatment of forgiveness not developed within the context of God and His Word, runs the risk of mistaken moorings and has a greater propensity for error. Therefore, the utilization of a biblical worldview is essential in developing a comprehensive and scripturally accurate model of forgiveness. The understanding and application of any biblical teaching is important because error leads to heresy, and misinterpretation is contrary to God’s truths, to His glory, and to reality (psychological and relational).

## *The Need for a Theocentric Approach*

### **First Thesis: The Need for a Unifying Theme**

One of the theses of this dissertation is that the grand unifying theme of God's redemptive history will yield a unified understanding of forgiveness that will bring clarity and cohesion to the divergent views found in the existing literature. A theocentric model of forgiveness will be unlike the prevailing models within the field in that it is established on the premise that everything can and should be understood in explicit reference to God and be biblically-based. What this means is that all of life, including misery and suffering and their solutions, should be understood in relation to God. All meaning and purpose of life, to include the meaning and application of forgiveness, corresponds to the meaning and purposes of God found throughout redemptive history. Specifically, an understanding of forgiveness must begin and end with God—from the definition of forgiveness, the reasons and consequences of unforgiveness, the motives for and the movement towards forgiveness, the question of conditionality, to the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation. Such forgiveness can only be accomplished by the empowering, gracious work of the Holy Spirit. Jones (1995) articulates the same vision and conviction:

First, that it is God's forgiveness, not inter-human forgiveness, that ought to provide the contours for our understanding of forgiveness; and, second, that a specifically Christian theological account of God's forgiveness, centered in Jesus Christ, ought to be the means of articulating that understanding. Further, in the process of developing that account I have argued that God's forgiveness initiates and sustains, by the power of the Holy Spirit, specific friendships and practices of Christian community and Christian life. It is in and through such friendships and practices of the Body of Christ that we learn to embody forgiveness. (p. 207)

### **Second Thesis: The Importance of God's Two-fold Commandment to Love**

God's two-fold commandment to love calls His children to love Him with all of their being and to love others as themselves. One can theoretically accept the commandment to love others, but many contend it is not always possible to love others as

one loves oneself. This crossroads elicits confusion, fear, and obstinacy when dealing with the issue of forgiveness. The second thesis is that a model of forgiveness must be developed within the context of God's two-fold commandment to love in general and derived from a right understanding of divine love in particular. Therefore, the next chapter explores the significance of God's redemptive history for understanding forgiveness and the relationship between forgiveness and God's two-fold commandment to love.

### **Conclusion**

A right understanding of forgiveness is vital because it shapes not only the way one understands relationships, but also provides a foundation for counseling people in relationships (Aponte, 1998; Enright et al., 1998b). Even more urgent, a right understanding and application of love and forgiveness serves as an overarching paradigm for living—giving meaning, direction, and purpose to all of life, including one's relationship with God. It is with this sense of urgency that attention is now directed to the issue of love.

## CHAPTER 2

### FORGIVENESS AND THE LAW OF LOVE

The foregoing analysis of the forgiveness literature seemed to offer more questions than answers. The two theses presented at the end of chapter 1 will serve as the trajectory and target for this current chapter. The first thesis asserts that the grand unifying theme of God's redemptive history yields a unified understanding of forgiveness and provides a foundation and framework from which to build a biblical understanding of forgiveness. The second thesis posits that a biblical understanding of forgiveness must be developed within the context of God's two-fold commandment to love. The second thesis not only flows from the first, but gives critical substance and shape to a theocentric definition of forgiveness, which is the ultimate goal for this chapter.

#### **Scripture's Grand Unifying Theme**

##### *Redemptive History*

All too often, struggling individuals deal with their problems in isolation. Not only do they withdraw from others, but they can also withdraw from God. One can develop a myopic view of life—the struggles and difficulties taking center stage, with little hope and much despair on the periphery. Getting beyond the brokenness and the pain seems impossible. The temporal struggles are all too real, but the reality is that one's tragic story is actually a subplot within a larger drama that transcends the shame, despair, and pain associated with the individual human struggle. Therefore, one's individual ordeal must be viewed through the lens of God's panoramic story of redemption (Augsburger 1996).

From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture makes known God's sovereign, redemptive work in the history of humanity. The Old and the New Testaments both point to the central figure in this salvific drama—Jesus Christ (Luke 24:27). In Christ, God stepped from eternity and entered time and space through the incarnation of the Son of God. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ had divine purposes—to bring glory to God by “showing the love of God” and by “restoring in sinful man the love toward God which had been lost” (Burnaby, 1938, pp. 168 & 171). Christ taught the essence of love and forgiveness through his teaching and death (1 John 4:10). Therefore, a theocentric understanding and definition of forgiveness must be rooted in God's redemptive history, sprouting from the rich ground of God's love and forgiveness, and bearing fruit that is consistent with the summation of God's Law of love, as taught by the One who called Himself the Truth.

God's redemptive history consists of four phases—Creation, the Fall, Redemption, and Consummation. All that God created was good; however, the need for forgiveness arose with the fall of humanity, or the emergence of sin—against God and others. Redemption, which includes the forgiveness of sins, is found only in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. At the end of history, with the advent of the new heaven and earth, forgiveness will no longer be needed when sin and death are abolished; however, those who will spend eternity with God in Christ will always be known as forgiven sinners, saved by grace.

### *Creation*

In the opening chapters of Genesis, one quickly understands two main themes of these passages: Every person is created in God's image and every person is created to be in relationship—first and foremost, in relationship with God and second, in relationship with others. Not only was heaven and earth created, but community was created between God and His people, and between the first man and woman.

## **Created by God, for God, and in His Image**

As described in the opening two chapters of Genesis, God created man and woman as part of His created order. From the creation account, humanity is shown to be distinctively different from all other creation. The critical difference does not merely rest in the anatomical, genetic, or neurological uniqueness associated with the *homo sapient* order, but is found in the divine image of every man and woman. God formed the man and woman in His own image (Gen 1:27) and breathed into them the breath of life (Gen 2:7), doing so with much care and loving knowledge (Isa 64:8; Ps 139). God created man and woman ultimately for His own glory (Isa 43:7). These creational particulars highlight the extraordinary value of each man and woman. In other words, every person has inherent worth, since each person is made by God to bear His image and to worship Him. In the Garden of Eden, God also created a paradise of mutuality—trust and unity of fellowship with God and others. Perfect love flowed first and foremost within the Trinity, then within the garden during this first period of redemptive history. The need for forgiveness did not exist. The first humanity enjoyed intimacy with not only each other, but with the perfect community that exists within the triune God.

### **Creation: Implications for Forgiveness**

What are the implications of being created in God's image with regards to forgiveness? The fact that finite human beings are made to reflect the image of their infinite Creator allows for at least three broad inferences. First, people are more than flesh and blood. Every person is an embodied soul, with a spirit that will live for an eternity. (For a discussion of biblical anthropology, see Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*; John Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) People are of worth; relationships between people are of value. Thus, an essential element of forgiveness is that every person has worth and is meant to live in a peaceful, unified

relationship with others. Inherent to God's moral attributes—goodness, love, mercy, etc. (Grudem, 1994)—is the aspect of relationality. Virtues such as love, kindness, and mercy exist only within the context of relationships. Therefore, it seems likely that these relational virtues are involved when dealing with forgiveness and relational offenses. Third, it can be reasoned that every person, being made by God as His representative, is meant to live according to His ways, as a reflection of his Creator. It makes sense that the One who created humanity knows what is best for His creation. Scripture gives abundant guidance for relationships—how to love, to forgive, and to create unity for the purpose of God-glorifying community.

### *The Fall*

The second scene of God's providential history is revealed when the first man and woman rebelled against God (Gen 3:1-7) by submitting their will to the evil will of Satan, another powerful authority (Job 1:7ff; John 12:31; 14:30; Eph 2:2), yet far inferior to God. This act of defiance brought about two deaths—inevitable physical death and the more immediate and significant spiritual death that separated them from the presence of the holy God. The sin of Adam and Eve resulted in the moral and noetic depravity (Ps 51:5; Rom 7:18; Titus 1:15) of every descendant after them. They also experienced shame and guilt (Gen 3:7) after realizing they were naked and had sinned against God. They no longer enjoyed the privileged, intimate relationship with their Creator. They no longer were perfect reflectors of God's image. Foolishly, they withdrew from the only One who could offer safe refuge and deliver them from this dilemma; however, they also withdrew because of God's fearsome holiness, knowing that they fully deserved His wrath. When questioned by God about their actions, the man defended himself by blaming both God and the woman (Gen 3:12), and the woman, in turn, blamed her actions and attitude on the serpent (Gen 3:13). Humanity's relationship with God was broken. The interpersonal relationship between the first man

and woman was damaged and the created order was disordered.

### **The Fall: Implications for Forgiveness**

The entrance of sin resulting from man's rebellion against God provides a multitude of implications for forgiveness. First and foremost, the need for forgiveness was called forth after the dark stain of sin entered into community. Second, because of the sinful heart of humanity (Isa 64:5b-7; Jer 17:9), relationships with God and others are hindered and damaged, resulting in deep pain and shame. Unfortunately, broken hearts are the norm in a fallen world; there will always be a need to forgive and be forgiven. Third, rebellion against God's ways leads to a withdrawal from Him, the source of perfect love. Sin also causes one to question the goodness, faithfulness, and justice of God, and distorts the truth of who He is. It is common for a person struggling with unforgiveness to cry out to God with a host of questions: (Past) "Where was God?" "If God is truly a loving God, why did He allow this thing to happen to me?" (Present) "I pray that God will kill that man who did that to me!" "Why doesn't He just take the pain away?" (Future) "God can never make me forgive! How can He, knowing what happened to me?" "God will not bring about justice or vengeance!" Fourth, the deceit and distortion of sin impacts one's ability to overcome the feelings associated with unforgiveness—hatred, bitterness, resentment, and vengeance—and views the offender in a way other than as a despicable, evil person. Finally, sin intensifies the focus upon oneself and diminishes the vision of God and others. Self-righteousness, self-absorption, self-protection, self-service, and self-justice becomes the mantra in the meditation of unforgiveness.

### ***Redemption***

Even before the creation of time, the eternal Father, by His pleasure and in the mystery of His good and perfect will, saw the *need* for forgiveness because of the sin to come. God intended for His Son to be the means through which He would

redeem His people from the wages of sin, thus *revealing* the ultimate portrait of forgiveness and love in the cross of Christ. God, being rich in mercy and great in His love for His people (Eph 2:4), offered the perfect solution to the problem of sin that soils and separates everyone from Him. God sent His Son Jesus Christ, who lived a sinless life, to be a perfect sacrifice for His people. A perfect sacrifice was required to satisfy a holy God. God demonstrated His divine love by dying for His enemies, justifying them by His blood and saving them from the wrath of God (Rom 5:8-9). By grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Eph 2:8), one is forgiven of sin and declared righteous before God, all because of the substitutionary and final work of Christ on the cross. (For a discussion of the modern debates on justification, see Leon Morris, *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*; Mark Seifrid, *Christ, our Righteousness*.) God's merciful redemption is even foreshadowed in creation when God shed the blood of animals to cover the shameful nakedness of Adam and Eve before they were exiled from the Garden (Gen 3:21).

### **Redemption: Implications for Forgiveness**

Redemption involves relational restoration. Implications abound for forgiveness from this phase of redemptive history. First, through the work of divine forgiveness, the pathway was made to reconcile individuals with God, thus restoring personal intimacy with their Creator through justification in Christ. Second, through the work of redemption, God's children are re-created with a new heart, spirit, and identity in Christ, along with a new perspective, a desire for God, and access to supernatural love and grace. In other words, through the forgiveness of sins, one who has been saved by grace can begin the process of being restored to a truer image of God through the journey of sanctification (2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10). Third, God revealed divine forgiveness through the cross of Christ, thus providing the supreme and authoritative paradigm for His people to emulate, forgive "just as God in Christ also has forgiven

you” (Eph 4:32; cf. Col 3:13). Finally, God revealed His great love through forgiveness for the sake of His glory and to make His power known (Eph 2:4; Ps 106:8).

### *Consummation*

Redemptive history can be described as God’s love story, starting with the God lovingly creating the heavens and earth, along with the divinely appointed marriage between the first man and woman, and ending with the ultimate, everlasting marriage—the wedding between Christ and His bride, the church (Rev 19:7-8). From God’s perspective, this marriage represents the supreme, most significant relationship that will ever exist, aside from the Trinity. God is forever wedded to His people in an intimacy that can be compared to marriage. But what are some of the other significant truths about the end of the age? The end of redemptive history is also associated with the final judgment of all humanity, the final and ultimate vengeance of God, the final and complete restoration of the image of God, and the final community of God’s people.

### **Final Judgment: A Standing Account**

#### *Know Christ’s Justice*

It is Christ who proclaims justice from the beginning to end. He proclaimed justice at the start of His earthly ministry as He opened the eyes of the blind, healed the sick, and freed the captives. It will be Christ who will bring full justice throughout creation with His final victory (Matt 12:20). Every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that He is indeed Lord (Phil 2:10-11). Upon Christ’s return, everyone will stand before God’s appointed Judge—for “His judgments are true and righteous” (Matt 12:30; Rev 19:2). The Lord can be trusted, for He loves justice and never forsakes His children (Ps 37:28). He alone will execute justice and pass down judgment (Isa 61:8; 63:5-6). The fact that everyone must appear before the judgment seat of Christ and receive their just penalty for what was done in the body, whether good or bad (2 Cor

5:10), should be a major factor in helping humans deal with forgiveness.

### ***Trust in Christ's Justice***

Christians can find rest in knowing that every wrong will be paid for either by the cross of Christ or at the final judgment; therefore, we should trust God to handle ultimately the wrongdoing—trusting is directly beneficial against our natural tendency to ruminate with bitterness and resentment. Reliance upon God and His perfect justice helps one follow the path of Christ, who “when reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly” (1 Pet 2:22-23) (Grudem, 1994, p. 1147).

### **Final Ultimate Vengeance**

#### ***Know God's Vengeance***

The Lord commands His own never to take their own revenge, but to “leave room for God's wrath” (Rom 12:19). Not only will God's judgment be perfect, but His vengeance will be beyond anything that can be asked or imagined. God's omnipotence ensures His vengeance will be complete because there is no one more powerful than He—“He will shatter kings in the days of His wrath” (Ps 110:5), and “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31). God's omniscience ensures His justice will be perfect because He knows all—“There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him” (Heb 4:13). Finally, God's omnipresence ensures His wrath is not limited by time or space. No one can escape from His presence (Ps 139) or His wrath.

#### ***Trust in God's Vengeance***

The Lord will vindicate His people and have compassion on them, so that His name will be glorified forever, throughout every generation (Ps 135:13-14). At the end of time, the Lord will make it evident to everyone that His good hand is upon His

people, and His righteous anger is waged against His enemies (Isa 66:14). Therefore, by knowing and trusting in God's final justice and vengeance, one can trust that in His time, everyone will receive their just and final reward and judgment. This aspect of forgiveness requires supernatural faith to relinquish any self-deceived notion that one is able to carry out just and righteous judgment better than God.

### **Perfection of God's Image**

The consummation brings forth perfection in God's creation in general, and in His redeemed people in particular. First, all who have died will be given heavenly bodies far more glorious than the earthly ones, bodies that will be "imperishable," "honorable," and "raised in power," which "bear the image of the heavenly" (1 Cor 15:40-49). Next, the journey of sanctification will be complete in heaven. No longer will there be a battle between the flesh and the spirit (Rom 7); there will "no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain" (Rev 21:4). Sin will be gloriously absent, along with its corresponding consequences. Like never before, everyone in Christ will be able to love God with fully devoted hearts, completely sanctified souls, minds void of deceit, distortion, or distraction, and every fiber of energy and strength. In short, everyone in Christ will be able to love God and others like Christ. Finally, even greater than the absence of sin and suffering in the era to come, all of God's children will be in the direct presence of the Lord, experiencing an overflow of infinite joy and an unyielding source of soul-satisfying pleasures (Ps 16:11). There will no longer be a need for the sun or the moon because the glory of God will illumine the new kingdom (Isa 60:19-20; Rev 21:23). The worship of God will be perfect in spirit and truth. Redemption will be complete—all of His children will be restored to being perfect image bearers of their Creator and Redeemer.

### **The Final Community of Love**

Those who love God are exhorted to keep their eyes on the heavenly realms,

where Christ is (Col 3:1), to remember that they are aliens in this world (1 Pet 1:1, 2:11), to yearn for being with Christ in their true home in heaven, and to look forward to the return of Christ (Rev 22:20). The Bible describes the new heaven and new earth as a place where there will be peace, prosperity, vigorous health, and comfort by the Father (Isa 66:10-14). Reconciliation will be personified, perfect unity experienced, and perfect love will abound once again in the land. Spiritual community will be the norm. All of God's children will be able to perfectly fulfill the two-fold commandment to love, all because of the work of His powerful, efficacious, redemptive love.

### **Consummation: Implications for Forgiveness**

At first glance, one can too easily dismiss the significance of the consummation in dealing with forgiveness. Aside from redemption, this last, but all important phase of God's history, provides substantial implications for the topic at hand. First, love reigns supreme for all of eternity. Perfect love found within the Trinity will also exist within the marriage union between Christ and His bride in the consummated kingdom. Thus, the temporality of forgiveness should be understood within the context of the eternity of love. Next, the future reality of God's final judgment and vengeance is an undeniable truth which must be factored into a theocentric model of forgiveness. Faith in the One who is the righteous Judge is essential if one is to give up one's thoughts of self-justice or revenge in order to place them in the hands of the Lord. To act with malice and hatred towards the offender is not only displeasing to God, but discounts His future judgment and undermines His redemptive power in the life of those impacted and involved in any moral offense. Moreover, present solace must be found in the future grace of God's finished work in the body and soul of every believer. Promise of completed redemption gives the offended hope in dealing with irreparable injuries and in forgiving the one who seems to be unredeemable. This perspective demands a deep faith in the Redeemer and requires

unselfish concern for the souls of others. For the one who seeks forgiveness, the truth of future glory encourages one to press on, under the gracious and forgiving love of God, despite the unforgiveness of the other. Furthermore, developing a vision of fullness of joy and pleasures in the presence of the Lord, enjoyed within a community of brothers and sisters in Christ, causes one to crave such divine and pure unity. People can overcome much adversity with an overwhelming and powerful vision of hope and love. Finally, the need to forgive will no longer exist in the consummated era. With salvation complete, all of God's children will stand forever righteous before the Father in Christ. With death swallowed up in victory and sin put to death, relationships will flourish in the environment of perfect love (1 Cor 15:54-57), and forgiveness will no longer be needed. In other words, love will continue long after the need for forgiveness comes to an end.

### ***Redemptive History: Implications for Forgiveness***

God is creating, initiating, redeeming, and moving humanity towards the end of time. God's eternal love has been and will continue to be revealed throughout redemptive history. Love descended from heaven (1 John 4:8; Phil 2:6-7), became flesh and dwelled among humanity (John 1:14), and was personified in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of His enemies' sins (Eph 1:7; Rom 5:8). Therefore, God's history is a chronology of His love manifested primarily in the forgiveness of sins for the purpose of purifying a people for His own possession (Titus 2:14).

Given the inseparable connection between love and forgiveness throughout redemptive history, the development of a theocentric model of forgiveness must investigate four essential elements: (1) a biblical understanding of divine love, (2) an in-depth analysis of God's two-fold commandment to love, including enemy love (Piper 1979), (3) a biblical look at forgiveness, and (4) the relationship between the call to forgive and the call to love. Once all four areas are examined, a definition of

forgiveness will be presented.

## **The Love of God**

### *The Confusion about Love*

If one were to inquire anywhere in the world and ask people to define love, there would be a myriad of responses. One might hear definitions such as “love is never having to say you are sorry,” “love is a passionate feeling towards another,” “love is to care deeply for another,” or “love is giving yourself to another without regard for oneself.” So what is love? Can an objective, universal definition of love be agreed upon? Perhaps there are different types of love. If so, which type of love should be used to develop a theocentric understanding of forgiveness? Before addressing these and other questions, a detour will preface the discussion of love from God’s perspective—a survey of the common counterfeit loves which cause much confusion in the forgiveness dialogue.

### **Counterfeit Love**

A theocentric understanding of love, as generally revealed through the survey of Scripture and specifically through the sacrificial life and death of Jesus Christ, is not readily grasped by men and women in today’s culture. Instead, there seems to be a loose conglomeration of meanings for love that are subjectively and contextually derived. The concept of love has drifted far from its divine purposes and is grounded upon the sandbar of secularism and self-fulfillment. Consequently, contemporary love lacks the tension that Augustine describes as the wrestling of two loves—the love of the world and the love of God (Augustine, 1995). The streams of counterfeit love, with the currents of self-centeredness, sensate drives, temporality, and a distorted vision of the object, flow from the sea of depravity and serve to push and pull love off God’s intended course. Created self-love, designed to be directed to God and others, is blown off track by the wayward winds of sin:

It is only because man is fallen that the love which naturally should serve nature's Author, begins as self-love with the service of the body's needs; yet because it is made for God it cannot rest in the finite, and thrusts the soul upon an unending pursuit of worldly pleasures that can never satiate its longing. (Burnaby, 1938, p. 259)

Idoltrous self-love is a dominant interpretation of love in the world based on the autonomous and individualistic sinful nature of men and women. Simply put, perverted self-love is motivated by self gain (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995). Even when love is directed outward to others, selfish love seeks to receive something in return. Kierkegaard describes both erotic and friendship love as forms of worldly love and asserts that they are the pinnacle of "self-esteem" or "self-deification" (1847/1995, pp. 56, 58).

A love driven by biological or affective sensations, directed primarily at one's own pleasure, is another form of perverted self-love. The God-designed love that a parent has for a son or daughter, or even the love of a child for his/her parents is not under scrutiny here. The type of love being critiqued is one which is based on satisfying no other but oneself and its duration is determined by the presence of temporal feelings. This distorted type of love has no consideration for the eternal—in terms of its truths, rewards, or consequences. Inherent to this aspect of false love is the confusion in "the desire to use what ought to be enjoyed and enjoy what ought to be used" (Augustine, 1982). In other words, the self's enjoyment is the ultimate end, while the object of selfish love is merely the means to be used to obtain the enjoyment. Such a self-motivated love runs contrary to a theocentric paradigm, where the end of all things is always God, as opposed to the self (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938; Edwards 1852/2000).

Counterfeit love looks at its object with distorted vision, straining to see what seems to be perfection and keeping a blind eye to the imperfections (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995). Beauty, as defined subjectively by the world or one's lover, powerfully allures the subject in a fantastical-type love. This type of preferentially-driven love,

which is dependent upon the attributes of the created object, can easily lead to temporal and conditional affections. The lover considers himself deceived either as the vision of the object changes—from a developing awareness of imperfections and/or a fading allurements—or when the object does not return love in ways expected. Consequently, one “falls out of love.”

The fantasy of self-motivated love results in deception. The falsity of self-seeking love results in despair. The fickleness of such self-love makes one distrustful. So what is true love? Where can it be found? How does it differ from counterfeit love? God provides the answer to these and other questions by personally demonstrating a real, authentic, and immutable love all throughout Scripture and ultimately displayed in Jesus Christ.

### *A Portrait of Divine Love*

Despite the world’s confusion, an objective, universal understanding of love exists and is described in Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. True love transcends all of creation and is the supreme grace of God. However, the eyes and hearts of the world cannot grasp the full relevance or significance of such love. God opens the eyes and changes the heart, so that one knows the reality of a love that is of incomparable worth, yet is freely given at a cost to the Lover, and experiences the veracity of a love that knows all about its object, yet is impartially offered. Such love is not some esoteric notion that can only be discussed philosophically—quite the contrary. Such love actually existed in bodily form, lived among humanity, and ultimately revealed Himself through a single, supreme act—“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Morris poignantly states, “When we see man for what he is, the wrath of God for what it is, and the cross for what it is, then and only then do we see love for what it is” (Morris, 1981, p. 131). Scripture not only expresses love in terms of action, but in a more definite and personal

manner—"God is love" (1 John 4:8). Therefore, an objective, universal understanding of love is theocentric; it starts with God, ends with God, and describes God Himself.

The portrait of divine love requires broad strokes of color to bring out the fullness of expression. The intent at this point is to highlight the major features of love, focusing on God's perspective and how His love interacts with humanity. Afterwards, the portrait is given animation by discussing the powerful, transforming purposes of divine love.

## **Divine Love Is Supreme**

### ***Divine Attributes***

God is the source of love since He is love (1 John 4:8; Kierkegaard, 1847/1995). Many important implications arise from the divinity of love. Being divine, love is eternal and immortal (Augustine, 397/1952c; Dagg, 1852). As with God, love existed before the creation of the world and will continue to exist forevermore—love never fails (1 Cor 13:8a). Therefore, divine love should never be doubted or tested. There is no chance for God's love to fail, since it has been proven by the test of eternity (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995). Divine love is uncreated (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938; Julian of Norwich, 1413/1988), thus, it transcends the created order and is not tainted by the sinfulness that exists in creation due to the Fall. Love rejoices in its righteousness, not in the unrighteousness of the world (1 Cor 13:6). Love's divinity reveals its independent (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995), sovereign nature, depending neither on anything outside itself to exist due to its infinite, self-sustaining ways, nor on any other to be satisfied, since God Himself is the "supreme good," the "sum of all good things" (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938, pp. 85-86). Divine love is immutable (Augustine, 397/1952c; Kierkegaard, 1847/1995), and consequently, never changes. Finally, the Spirit of God is the Spirit of love (Rom. 5:5; Edwards, 1852/2000), which enables love to abide continually in the souls of His children, and "is no more than the

gifts of eternal life and knowledge of the truth . . . [and] is part of divine likeness” (Burnaby, 1938, p. 161). Indwelling, divine love is “wrought in the human heart” by the Spirit of God (Edwards, 1852/2000, p. 5), actively works in and through the soul, and brings God and each of His children “into a most intimate and most real unity” (Burnaby, 1938, p. vi).

### ***The Supreme Grace***

How does love compare to the other graces of God, such as faith, hope, humility, and repentance? First, all graces are connected and dependent upon one another (Edwards, 1852/2000). All graces have the same source, are conveyed by the same Spirit, and are guided by the same laws of God. Second, the relationship between divine love and all other graces of God might be compared to the spirit’s relationship to the body. Love is like the spirit which enlivens and directs the body, while the other graces serve as the body, as they are diverse manifestations of love (Dagg, 1852). In other words, all other graces are but a means to the same end—love. Third, love enables the other graces, in particular faith and hope (Julian of Norwich, 1413/1988; Edwards, 1852/2000), which explains why love is the greatest of the three (1 Cor 13:13). Without love, knowledge, faith, works of charity, and self-sacrifice are all worthless (1 Cor 13:1-3), since love is the root of all divine graces. Therefore, love is the summation of all Christian graces and, in being so, is the supreme grace of God.

### **Divine Love Is Costly**

When love is shared within the Trinity, perfect love flows unhindered within the confines of a holy and righteous God. However, when God’s love is directed towards humanity, there is “a cost” realized because of the presence of sin. The cost is associated neither with a monetary value, even though the magnitude of sin is involved, nor with a financial transaction, even though the actions of rebellious people against a holy God are involved. The distortion, defilement, and disintegration of God’s created

order caused by sin (Plantinga, 1995) subtracts from God's intended design or purpose. The sin of humanity cannot be ignored by God since it is contrary to His righteousness and personally separates humanity from its Creator. Therefore, there is a cost required to deal with the wages of sin and to settle the righteous indignation caused by offending God.

As background, under the old covenant of Yahweh, payment for the forgiveness of sin was satisfied with the blood sacrifice of animals (Leviticus). However, under the new covenant, God provided a perfect sacrifice that would be paid once for all (Heb 7:27; 1 Pet 3:18). From God's perspective, divine love is costly in three ways. First, the Son of God humbled Himself and condescended from the heavenly realm to earth in the form of a man. Jesus' incarnation was costly because he did not "regard equality with God a thing to be grasped" (Phil 2:6), despite being fully deserving of His exalted status as God. Second, the extreme cost of divine love is most graphically and gloriously displayed in the suffering and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, who denied His own will and welfare for the sake of His enemies. Beyond human comprehension, Christ absorbed the punishment for sin in full and graciously offers salvation without cost (Isa 55:1; Rev 21:6; 22:17). Third, divine love is costly on an ongoing basis as God deals with the sins of His children with long-suffering and kindness, not taking into account a wrong suffered, bearing all things, and enduring the continual opposition from His people (1 Cor 13:4-7). Inherent in the costly nature of divine love is a purposeful disregard for one's own rights and prerogatives for the sake of another—Jesus did not regard His deity (Phil 2:6) and will (Matt 26:39) as He submitted to the Father's will for the sake of the Father's glory, revealed through the salvation of His enemies.

### **Divine Love Is Impartial**

Divine love always flows from the greater to the lesser, since God is the

supreme good. Every human object of God's love is imperfect, unworthy, and unmerited to receive perfect love (Morris, 1981)—thus divine love is supreme grace. Unlike the eyes of counterfeit love, divine love sees the realities of the human soul—foibles and fortes alike, and is driven, rather than repulsed, by the condition of the soul to move towards the other with care and concern. Furthermore, God loves without partiality (Matt 22:16; Rom 2:11; Eph 6:9), making no distinctions between cultures, classes, or condition of souls (Acts 15:9; Rom 3:22; 10:12; Col 3:11). In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul describes the dispositions of divine love without any reference to the object, or recipient (Piper, 1979). Lastly, the love of God takes pleasure in its object (Tozer, 1961), despite the fact that the object cannot, in any way, add value or do anything for the Lover.

### **Divine Love Is Interactive**

Divine love is always active (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938; Bernard of Clairvaux, 1971), moving with intentionality (Burnaby, 1938; Morris, 1981), within the context of relationships. The Spirit of love works to bring about the divine purposes of the Father and the Son. Within the human soul, Augustine describes love as the “motion of the soul towards the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and of one's neighbor for the sake of God” (397/1952c, book 1, ch. 28). Given this understanding, divine love originates and flows from God, works in the human soul, then issues back towards its ultimate end, back to Love Himself (Bernard of Clairvaux, 1987). Love flows back to God through joyful worship and obedience, and by loving one's neighbors so that they too find increasing joy and satisfaction in God. Of course, such a finite, closed-system description of the dynamics of love is limited by time and space and takes away from love's infinite and omnipresent reality. However, divine love does work in the temporal sense, working efficaciously to carry out the eternal purposes of God in and through the souls of His children.

### *Definition of Love*

From this brief survey of the various qualities of God's love, one might still ask, "So, what is the love of God?" Divine love, as expressed within the Trinity, is the work of God to preserve and exalt His own supreme and righteous glory for His own enjoyment (cf. Piper, 2003a; John 17:5). Expressed in relation to humanity, the love of God is His active, self-giving work in the human soul that enables one to worship Him, with unparalleled delight and satisfaction. Divine love, expressed and offered between human beings, is a work of God in the human soul that compels one to give oneself for another, regardless of the cost, so that the other might love God more deeply. The love of God is supremely defined and demonstrated by Christ's death on the cross—God paid the ultimate cost to redeem and reconcile a people for His own possession (Titus 2:14), so that they might enjoy and be satisfied in the glory of their Creator and Redeemer. Piper not only provides some practical examples of what the love of God looks like in the Christian life, but starts with how divine love is mistakenly understood from a human-centered perspective (Piper, 2003a):

I'll give you a test to see if we [as the church] have misled you or not. This is a test to see if your sense of God's love for you is man-centered or God-centered. Does it put your value or God's value at the bottom of your relationship with God? Here's the question: Do you feel more loved by God when he makes much of you, or when he bears the pain it takes to enable you to enjoy making much of him forever? My generation has told you in a thousand ways—inside and outside the church—that being loved means being made much of. Some of you can't even conceive or feel any other way of being loved. You have sought this all your life . . . Therefore what is the love of God? It is the preservation and the exaltation of his own holiness for your enjoyment forever. And what is it then to be loved by this God? It is not to be made much of, but to be given the ability, by the death and resurrection of Jesus, to enjoy making much of him forever. God loves me when he helps me be satisfied in God and not in me. God loves me when he helps me forget about me and be thrilled with Christ. God loves me when he dies in my place that I might know him and be satisfied with all that he is for me in Jesus. God loves me when he makes me passionate for his holiness. God's love for me is holy love. Therefore it exalts the infinite worth of God. It is radically God-centered.

### *The Purposes of Love*

Divine love directly reflects God and His ways, since God is the origin of

love. But why does God love in such a way? For what purposes has He designed such a supreme, costly, impartial, and interactive love? God's purposes for His love are all associated with what He is doing within redemptive history. God's love is purposely at work creating, conforming, and bringing about community as He prepares His bride, the church, for the consummation of the ultimate wedding.

### **Creative Love**

God's love is creatively at work throughout the redemptive history of each of His children (Morris, 1981)—from the time of conception, at the time of the conversion of a soul to newness of life, through the conforming work of sanctification, all the way to the point of glorification, when body and soul reaches the pinnacle of redemption. Personal history begins when God brings a human soul, fashioned in His image, into bodily existence through His creative hands (Jer 1:5; Ps 139). Because of sin, every God-created person is spiritually dead and imperfectly reflects its Creator. However, God graciously re-creates the soul, or enlivens the person with Christ, by His great love (Eph 2:4). A soul redemptively encountered by divine love is never the same—the old heart of stone is transformed into a heart of flesh and the new life in Christ emerges (Ezek 36:26; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal 6:15). In His sovereign compassion, God's love towards His own people is creative in that He loves them not for any of their existing qualities, but for what they will become through His faithful, shaping love (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938). Furthermore, at the moment of spiritual re-birth, God's uncreated, divine love dwells in the regenerate soul (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938), making it possible for one to love the Lord and others with His own love (Julian of Norwich, 413/1988). Being raised from death to life is a definitive spiritual milestone in a Christian's story of redemption; however, the love of God continues to work in ways that result in increasing conformity to Christ.

### **Conforming Love**

The Christian life is all about change. Change in behavior, in perspective, in attitude, and most importantly, in affections. Divine love contends for the souls of others as it battles sin and stirs the heart towards holiness. All throughout the journey of sanctification, God's conforming love brings about increasing Christ-likeness in the redeemed soul, according to the Creator's intended design. Upon conversion, the full beauty and power of divine love enters and embodies imperfect vessels wracked by the moral and noetic effects of sin. Love is powerful and is somewhat mysterious in how it impacts the soul. Love has the power to untwist, shape, and mold that which has been distorted and perverted, mysteriously and uniquely bringing about beauty from brokenness. Furthermore, love has a way of healing deep wounds and restoring life and vitality to a weary and withered soul. God's perfecting love undertakes the reformatory work of reshaping the soul so that the hatred of unrighteousness and the love for righteousness increases in intensity (1 John 4:12; 1 Cor 13:6; Kierkegaard, 1847/1995). This redemptive work is completed in both body and soul in the consummation of history.

### ***Love Decreases Sin***

"Love . . . does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices in the truth" (1 Cor 13:6). To put it simply, love hates sin and loves holiness. Sin can be defined as a failure to love, given the contextual understanding of the Decalogue and God's double love command (Crabb, 1988; Geisler, 1973). To put it differently, failure to love is "a failure to live according to God's design" (Morris, 1981, p. 36). Therefore, divine love is directly opposed to sin. Even though love is typically not thought of as a weapon, divine love is the primary weapon in God's arsenal against sin—it has the power to triumph over evil (Allender & Longman, 1992). The power of love to battle sin is seen most exquisitely in Christ's death on the cross. Furthermore, at the end of time, final victory will be won through Jesus Christ, and death will be conquered once and for all

(1 Cor 15:54-57). One of the primary ways love conforms the soul of the believer is by putting to death the old self—its sinful desires and deeds. Over time, hatred for sin grows and willful rebellion against God lessens in the heart. The mind grows disgusted with the things that once captured its imagination. Love endures all (1 Cor 13:7), and will not be conquered by the enemy (Edwards, 1852/2000).

### ***Love Increases Righteousness***

While love brings the soul into greater conformity through its battle with sin, there is a simultaneous increase in righteousness through the perfecting work of love. Fruits of grace emerge in the soul's desires and deeds, as well as in the cognitions of the mind. The desire for God grows from the soil of incomparable satisfaction found only in Him (Matt 5:6). The desire to be pleasing to Him (2 Cor 5:9) becomes more dominant, and a longing to be with the Lord in heaven develops (2 Cor 5:8). Blossoming deeds of obedience give evidence of Christ's abiding love and results in fullness of divine joy (John 15:8-11). Deeds are no longer done for self glory or out of a sense of obligation, but done out of a sense of gratitude, delight, and for God's glory (2 Cor 10:31). The mind dwells more frequently and lovingly on "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, . . . anything worthy of praise" (Phil 4:8). The renewing mind grows in its ability to know the will of God and results in a deepening faith in the Lord. Throughout the journey of sanctification, the goal of the supreme virtue of love is to reshape the human soul into greater conformity to Christ. Love originates from God, does its perfecting work in the human soul, then issues forth from the soul back to God. The cycle of conforming love is never ending.

### **Communing Love**

Up to this point, much has been said about divine love's purpose in the human soul—creating anew and conforming the soul to God's created design. Even

though the love of God works at the individual level, there is a much bigger handiwork taking place in redemptive history. The eternal motion of divine love (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995) is at work knitting together and building up a people for His own possession—the body, or bride, of Christ. Love is relational, exists only as it is shared, and does not diminish by being shared (Burnaby, 1938).

Divine love knits together the Trinitarian community in perfect unity. Similarly, God's love not only redeems individuals, but binds them together to form the body of Christ (Col 2:2; T. Edwards, 1852/1995). The communal love of God that supernaturally produces the "love of the brethren" is "theandric in activity, Emmanuel, God with us" (Burnaby, 1938, p. 177). In other words, God's abiding love knits together the individual members of Christ's body and perpetuates the love that exists between them, so they can live as one (Morris, 1981).

The love of God not only binds His children into community, but also builds up the body (Eph 4:16). A healthy body grows in stature and strength, as does the body of Christ. Every aspect of building up the body involves love. Kierkegaard (1847/1995) makes this point with clarity:

But what, in the spiritual sense, is the ground and foundation of the spiritual life that is to bear the building? It is love. Love is the source of everything and, in the spiritual sense, love is the deepest ground of the spiritual life. In every human being in whom there is love, the foundation, in the spiritual sense, is laid. And the building that, in the spiritual sense, is to be erected is again love, and it is love that builds up. Love builds up, and this means it builds up love. (p. 215)

Therefore, the building up of the body is understood as the building up of love within the body for God and for one another. Love is the foundation, the building material, and the building itself. Considering that love is the supreme grace and is the ultimate end—since God is love, this communal building up of love is the culminating purpose of love.

The portrait of divine love has been unveiled. As one stands back and takes in all the broad strokes of primary colors, love's divinity and supremacy elicits a sense

of awe and worship. Intense humility and a sense of amazing grace emerge as the cost of love is contemplated. Love's impartiality brings forth deep gratitude in the heart. The mysterious, supernatural, interactive nature of God's love causes the mind and soul to be dumbfounded as transcendent intimacy is encountered. One is transported into a radically different mindset as the definition of divine love is pondered. One is quickly reminded how theocentric love really is—God's love is the beginning and the end, and everything in between. Love is all about God, all about His glory, for God is love. The portrait of divine love becomes animated and relevant as its purposes are illuminated by the gallery lights of redemptive history. The one who encounters the genuine work of divine love will never be the same. The eternal, uncreated love of God masterfully and creatively brings new life to the person captured by love, and then engages the soul in the sanctifying process of Christ-like conformity. The glare of sin fades while the glow of righteousness increases in intensity. The more one is overwhelmed by the vision of divine love, the more the soul is stirred to love others so that they too might enjoy the magnificence of such God-glorifying love. The dynamic portrait of love produces a community of love, bound together and built up by love itself.

After this brief survey of divine love, it makes sense why Jesus stated that all of God's laws can be summed up by the two great commandments to love. God's love is the focal point of redemptive history and is manifested in His children's love for Him and for others. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of God's two-fold commandment to love, to include enemy love, is now necessary to better understand the relationship between forgiveness and love.

### **God's Two-Fold Commandment to Love**

In the Gospels (Matt 22:37-40; Mark 12:30-31), when the Jewish religious leaders ask Jesus which commandment is the greatest, He responds by quoting the Shema (Deut 6:4-5) along with a commandment from Leviticus 19:18 concerning

loving your neighbor. Jesus adds that these two love commands are the sum of all the Law and the Prophets (Matt 22:40). Augustine (397/1952c) contends that the double love of God and neighbor is the hermeneutical key to understanding Scripture (Brady, 2003; O'Donovan, 1980). Taking it one step further, the second thesis of this dissertation is that the two-fold commandment to love is the hermeneutical key to understanding forgiveness.

### *Love Fulfills the Law of God*

In the kingdom of God, the law of the land is derived from the commandment to love (Eichrodt, 1964/1967; Kierkegaard, 1847/1995). This law calls the people to love God and others in the spirit of God's love which permeates the community (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938). The law of God is a reflection of the nature of the Lawgiver (Piper, 1979), and spells out how love should be expressed in various relational realms (Geisler, 1973). In other words, each specific law provides a course of action whose aim is love. However, "the Law defines and defines but never arrives at the sum, which is love" (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995, p. 105).

### **The Purpose of the Law**

The Mosaic Law, established under the old covenant and included God's two-fold commandment to love (Deut 6:4-5; Lev 19:17-18), was a shadow and a temporary means to the end yet to come (Col 2:16-17; Heb 10:1). The Law exposes the depravity of the human soul (Rom 4:15; 5:20; 7:7), provides a contrasting context for the sinfulness of humanity, and establishes a standard of living based on the righteousness and justice of God (Pss 33:5; 89:14; 99:4; Prov 21:3; Eccl 3:16; Isa 56:1; Ezek 33:19). Therefore, the Law is designed to be a tutor that leads one to Christ (Gal 3:24), as one recognizes how short one falls from the glory of God (Rom 3:23). For those who fear God, the Law is an object of delight, better than gold or silver, and sweeter than honey (Ps 119).

## The Fulfillment of the Law

Humanity is incapable of keeping the standards of the Law. In fact, the Law serves to embolden sin (1 Cor 15:56; Rom 5:20; 7:8-12) along with its deadly wages (Rom 6:23). Attempts to achieve righteousness through the Law are futile (Gal 2:21; 3:21; Phil 3:9) since the righteousness of God can only be obtained through the righteousness of Christ. The extended quote from Kierkegaard (1847/1995) succinctly describes the death that comes from the Law:

A human being groans under the Law. Wherever he looks, he sees only requirement but never the boundary, alas, like someone who looks out over the ocean and sees wave after wave but never the boundary. Wherever he turns, he meets only the rigorousness that in its infinitude can continually become more rigorous, never the boundary where it becomes gentleness. The Law starves out, as it were; with its help one never reaches fulfilling, since its purpose is to take away, to require, to exact to the utmost, and in the continually remaining indefiniteness in the multiplicity of all its provisions is the inexorable exaction of the requirements. With every provision the Law requires something, and yet there is no limit to the provisions. The Law is therefore the very opposite of life, but life is the fulfilling. The Law is like death. (pp. 105-106)

Jesus Christ, who came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17), ushered in a new covenant, along with a new heart that is able to keep the commands of the Lord (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:26-27). (For a discussion of Christ and the fulfillment of the Law, see Tom Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment*.) Christ's perfect sacrificial death on the cross was the only thing powerful enough to gain victory over sin and death (1 Cor 15:54-57), and the only One righteous enough to fulfill the Law (Fee, 1987), for the Law ultimately pointed to Christ (Carson, 1995). During the present phase of redemptive history, the Law of Moses was abolished through Christ's fulfillment of the Law (Blomberg, 1992); however, under the new covenant of Christ, the love of neighbor fulfills the law (Rom 13:8, 10; Gal 5:14; Jas 2:8), for such love provides evidence of love of God (Calvin, 1996c).

Christ's fulfillment of the Law signifies Good News for the Christian. Under the new covenant of grace, the Spirit of love takes residence in the soul of the believer who is creatively reborn and begins the lifelong work of conformity to Christ. The

heart of flesh, enabled by the Spirit of love, loves God and others in increasing measures, which gives evidence to the reality of Christ in the soul of the disciple (John 13:35). Therefore, every follower of Christ must have a detailed understanding of each aspect of God's two-fold commandment to love, since loving their neighbor in Christ is the fulfillment of the Law.

### **Commanding Love of God and Others**

The concept of commanding love is incomprehensible to those who only understand the notion of romantic love, especially those whose hearts have not been infused and transformed by divine love. However, God's command for His creation to love Him and others is fully justified, knowing that by grace, love originates with God, initiates the work of love in the human soul, flows towards others, and returns back to God (Bernard of Clairvaux, 1987). God commands love for He enables the human heart to love according to His created design, as His own Spirit of love works in and through His children. In addressing both love for God and others, Edwards (1852/2000) explains the unity of love:

Christian love, both to God and man, is wrought in the heart by the same work of the Spirit. There are not two works of the Spirit of God, one to infuse a spirit of love to God, and the other to infuse a spirit of love to men; but in producing one, the Spirit produces the other also. (p. 6)

The love for God and love for others is the same love, and both testify to the transforming power of God in this new era of the kingdom (Piper, 1979). The phrase "you shall" associated with the God's law of double love is an eternal duty (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995) that will be carried out since God provides for what He demands (Piper, 1979). Moreover, the command to love will never be relaxed or resigned since the imperative points to God Himself and the expected obedience provides a glorious testimony to His incomparable love and grace. Given the command to love God and others, what does it mean to love God?

### *Loving God*

The command to love God goes back to the Decalogue revealed to Moses as recorded in the Pentateuch (Exod 20:1-7). God is the Supreme Good and is the only One worthy of worship. Moreover, God created humanity to be worshippers (Tripp, 2002); therefore, to love God with all of one's heart, soul, mind, and strength is rightfully the first great commandment.

#### **A Responsive Disposition of the Heart**

Before one is given new eyes to see and a new heart to believe, one hates God, His Laws, and His people because of their associated righteousness (Manton, 1997). In fact, because of the Fall, there is no one who seeks after God (Rom 3:10-18). But after the Spirit of love enters the human soul, the love of God brings about a divine love for both God and others (Edwards, 1852/2000; Morris, 1981). The sequence of love is critical—the Spirit of love enters into the human heart by grace (Rom 5:5), and the love for God issues forth in direct response. To love God is to love Love and cleave to Righteousness so that divine love is multiplied to self and others (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938). The Psalmist (Ps 73:28) describes his love for God as drawing near to Him, acknowledging that intimacy with God is his good (O'Donovan, 1980). Therefore, loving God is a response to God's indwelling love. As God initiates love, His redeemed children dependently responds out of gratitude and divine enablement (Morris, 1981).

The responsive love for God is not merely a reaction to God's love, but is also a disposition of the heart (Edwards, 1852/2000; Piper, 1979). The creative and conforming love of God conditions, or disposes, the heart to righteousness. The compasses associated with the affections, thoughts, and will are reoriented in a Godward direction, evidenced by the command that one should walk in love (Eph 5:2; T. Edwards, 1852/2000). Divine love becomes the very foundation for one's virtue, given that everything is "rooted and grounded in love" (Gal 5:22-23; Eph 3:17; T.

Edwards, 1852/2000; Morris, 1981). Consequently, loving God is a responsive act of worship that flows from a heart rightfully disposed to God.

### **Rewards for Loving God**

If it is not enough for God's Spirit of love to live and work in the redeemed person, God lavishes grace upon grace upon those who love Him. God knows and acknowledges His own (1 Cor 8:1-3) and works all things out for good to those who love Him (Rom 8:28). In the life to come, God promises the crown of life (Jas 1:12) as well as the kingdom of God (Jas 2:5) to those who love Him. Present and future blessings abound as God reminds His forgetful children of His faithfulness, renews weary souls through His sustaining grace, and redirects wayward affections heavenward where Christ is seated (Col 3:1). Blessings are indeed associated with loving God.

The regenerated soul is prompted and empowered to love God. This Godward dynamic of love provides the crucial foundation for the first half of God's law of love (loving God); however, in order to comprehend fully the second half of the law of love (loving others as oneself), a right understanding of self-love is warranted.

### ***Loving Self***

Inherent in God's created order is the desire to look after one's own welfare. There are many practical ways in which one loves oneself. At the most basic level, a God-given desire to eat when hungry, to drink when thirsty, and to sleep when tired keeps the body alive. When faced with danger, one takes the proper precautions to stay alive and safe. Relationally, a God-given desire for love leads one to seek relationships. When a loved one dies, one grieves the loss. When sadness abounds, one seeks something that might bring happiness. Ethically, a God-given conscience knows right from wrong. When faced with an ethical decision, one might choose the option that avoids violating a law and its consequential punishment. Spiritually, a God-given desire for purpose, meaning, and transcendent hope drives life. One is likely to spend

time doing what one feels called to do, to place value on things that have meaning, and to hope in someone or something beyond oneself. Psychologically speaking, to love oneself is to avoid pain and to seek pleasure (Piper, 1996). All of these examples of self-love can be accomplished naturally, without acknowledging or participating in the divine dynamic of love. The self-love referenced in the second great commandment involves the overflow of a heart divinely disposed to supernatural love (Edwards, 1852/2000). A false self-love deceives both self and neighbor (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938). Only a true self-love fulfills the law of love.

### **False Self-love**

The law of double love confronts and obliterates any false notion of self-love (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995). False self-love can be rooted out by examining its object, subject, and fruit. Humanity's created propensity to love, corrupted by sin, naturally fails to be directed at the right object, tends to be driven by selfish desires, and readily produces unlovely fruit. This misdirected love falls short, not only in the intended target, but also in essence. Therefore, such self-love, intended for Love Himself, remains restless and relentlessly pursues temporal objects incapable of satisfying the deep longings of the soul (Burnaby, 1938).

The objects of self-love tend to be preferentially selected, based on perceived worth, value, or benefit to the lover, and ultimately, merely a means to the subject's self-esteem. The subject of perverted self-love is motivated by self-gain and self-fulfillment. False self-love desires to rule that which only God should rule—one's own self and others; such love is more appropriately defined as "hatred" (Augustine, cited in O'Donovan, 1980, p. 54). False self-love is the source of quarrels and conflicts and bears a multitude of unlovely fruit. James 4:1-12 provides a sample basket of produce readily harvested from perverted self-love: anger, lust, envy, adultery, jealousy, pride, and a spirit of judgment. False self-love clearly does not fulfill the law of love.

## **True Self-love**

Defining what constitutes true self-love is imperative to obeying God's two-fold commandment to love. A proper starting point for understanding true self-love should begin with Love Himself. The essence of any God-glorifying love is divine love. A self-love pleasing to God is never separated from the love of God (de Jong, 1954). Next, any valid definition of self-love needs to contend with the tension found in the relationship between loving self and loving God, knowing that loving God wholly is the first great commandment. After the object of self-love is examined, the self's role in true self-love is considered.

## ***Loving Self and Loving God***

What is the only object worthy of whole-hearted love? What is the relationship between loving self and loving God? What is the object of true self-love? Even though "the self" tends to be the immediate answer to the latter question, the supreme object for any self-love has to be transcendent and infinitely superior to the self—God, who is love. False self-love aspires to be God (Burnaby, 1938) while true self-love not only recognizes the incomparable worth of God, but admits the infinite distance separating God from self (Edwards, 1852/2000).

God-designed, God-glorifying self-love is to love God with all of one's heart, soul, mind, and strength (Augustine, 400/1952a; Edwards, 1852/2000; Kierkegaard, 1847/1995; Piper, 1979, 1996). In other words, the best way to love oneself is to love God the most—more than self and others (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938). Therefore, the first great commandment defines true self-love. Additionally, the more one loves God, the more one loves oneself. Conversely, whoever loves himself and not God, does not love himself (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938). Such counter-intuitive logic resounds in Jesus' teaching, "Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses *his life* will preserve it" (Luke 17:33; cf. Matt 10:39; 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24). Denying self to preserve self leads to another significant characteristic of

true self-love—self-denial.

### ***Self-Denying Love***

“Love does not seek its own” (1 Cor 13:5). Paradoxically, the best way to love self is to deny self of any “individual, personal, private will,” as it opposes the will of God (Burnaby, 1938, p. 123). Self-denying love drives out vestiges of self-centered preferential love and any other attributes of false love (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995).

Christian and worldly self-denial can be contrasted in at least two ways (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995). First, the worldly idea of denying personal desires often results in worldly accolades, whereas the Christian idea of self denial is fully aware of the potential ridicule, shame, and even treatment as a criminal. Second, the worldly idea of self denial views any associated suffering in a subjective, temporal sense, whereas the Christian idea has an eternal perspective, carrying with it the full weight of God’s standard of holiness.

In spite of the seemingly unbearable conditions, self-denying love comes with some significant assurances. Those who deny self to love God and others for Christ’s sake are cared for by the God of all comfort (Edwards, 1852/2000; Kierkegaard, 1847/1995; cf. 2 Cor 1:3-5). Self-denying love for the glory of God builds up treasures in heaven, experiences “fullness of joy” and “pleasures forevermore” in the presence of God (Ps. 16:11), and ultimately receives an “unfading crown of glory” (1 Pet 5:4). Lastly, self-denial for the sake of Christ leads to a more intimate knowledge of the resurrection power, fellowship, and suffering of Christ (Phil 3:10). True self-love confounds all human reason and abilities; however, “the things that are impossible with people are possible with God” (Luke 18:27).

### ***Loving Neighbor as Self***

The second great commandment is “love your neighbor as yourself.” Before discussing the second of God’s double love command, the relationship between true

self-love and love for neighbor should be understood. Augustine clearly explains that even though both self-love and neighbor love have the same end, an important distinction exists:

The end is this: to cleave to God. So therefore the man who knows how to love himself, when instructed to love his neighbour as himself, must take his instruction to mean that he should commend to him as best he can the love of God." Despite the *regula*, the love which this man bears his neighbor is not the same love that he bears himself, for the end of action is cleaving to the supreme good, and that is something one can do only on one's own behalf. There is an imbalance between the "cleaving" which he does for himself and the "commending" which he does for the neighbor. Loving his neighbor "as himself" can mean only that he seeks to instill in the neighbor a self-love similar to his own. (*De civ. Dei*, X.3.2, cited in O'Donovan, 1980, p. 116).

In other words, self-love and neighbor love should both have the same end (Edwards, 1960; O'Donovan, 1994)—to love God, or as Augustine describes, "to cleave to" Him, referencing Psalm 73:28; however, one can only exhort one's neighbor to love God in like manner as oneself. Ultimately, the neighbor is responsible for his own relationship with God. Having looked at the relationship between self and neighbor love, one question remains, "who is my neighbor?"

### **Who Is My Neighbor?**

In Luke, an expert of the Law tests Jesus by asking Him how he might inherit eternal life (Luke 10:25ff). Jesus returns the question, to which the lawyer cites God's two-fold commandment to love. When Jesus affirms his answer and challenges the religious leader to obey the law of love, the man, wishing to justify himself asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answers by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. After telling the parable, Jesus asks the lawyer, "who acted as a neighbor?" Jesus focuses not on defining the neighbor, but focuses more on how one is to be a neighbor to others. In other words, the emphasis is not on the particular object of love; the emphasis is on the subject, the one who is to love others as oneself.

## Loving God and Loving Neighbor

God's law of double love instructs Christ's disciples who and how they should love: The objects of love are God and neighbor; the manner in which one loves is whole-heartedly and as oneself. But what is the relationship between loving God and loving neighbor? Scripture provides a direct answer to this question:

<sup>20</sup> If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. <sup>21</sup> And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also. (1 John 4:20-21)

In other words, it is not possible to love God and not one's neighbor. To love God with His love ensures neighbor love. The critical factor is whether the human soul has been redeemed by the creative, conforming, and communing love of God.

An earlier verse elucidates how loving others is a way of loving God, "The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8). Eternal life lies in the balance of love. As the text reads, one who does not love does not know God. Therefore, the one who loves, knows God. Since eternal life is defined as knowing God and His Son whom He sent (John 17:3), whoever does not love, does not have eternal life. The key to understanding this line of reasoning lies in the last four words of the verse—"for God is love." The relationship between love and eternal life (knowing God) magnifies the unity in the divine command to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself. The ability to love another as oneself is not dependent merely on one's own feelings or will, but is enabled by the powerful work of God's divine love in the soul. Since God is love, divine love is present in the soul of everyone who knows God. Such love cannot be hidden, cannot be contained, and cannot be separated from the will and the ways of God. Therefore, according to the will of God, as manifested in His own commandment, the one who knows God will love both God and others, for God is love.

There are two positive implications that can be drawn from the relationship between love for God and love for neighbor. First, the one who truly loves God is

drawn to those made in His image; similarly, the one who truly loves the finite image bearers is drawn to exalt and worship the infinite, original reality (Edwards, 1852/2000). Moreover, if loving God is cleaving to Him in an Augustinian sense, then there is a desire to be united with those who cleave to Him as well (Burnaby, 1938). Second, the same Spirit of love is at work loving God and neighbor (Augsburger, 1988). The love for the Head and for the members of the body is one and the same (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938)—the Spirit of love that knits together hearts (Col 2:2), builds itself up (Eph 4:16), and provides the roots and grounding for all of God’s own (Eph 3:17). The end result is “the one Christ loving Himself” (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938, p. 103).

### **Neighbor Love Is Divine**

Neighbor love, like true self-love, is entirely theocentric—begins and ends with, and flows from the love of God (Burnaby, 1938; Calvin, 1996b; O’Donovan, 1980, 1994). Neighbor love commends the perfect love of God to others, understanding that God and His love is the ultimate good. Such other-centered love is driven by the concern for the eternal welfare of one’s neighbors, desiring that they experience and cleave to God’s perfect love (Augustine, 400/1952a). Neighbor love also desires that others encounter God’s creative, conforming, and communing love so that they might become righteous in Christ and, in turn, “love evil men ‘that they may grasp righteousness’” (Augustine, cited in O’Donovan, 1980, p. 34). To love others any less would be hatred (Augustine, 397/1952c). Therefore, loving one’s neighbors so that they come to enjoy and be satisfied in God is true neighbor love (O’Donovan, 1980).

### **Neighbor Love Is Impartial**

Neighbor love overlooks personal imperfections as it pursues others by the call of God’s two-fold commandment to love (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995). Because neighbor love is divine, it is not principally attracted by the perceived beauty or worth

of the object, but the eyes are set on what others can become in Christ. Specifically, a neighbor is anyone and everyone, including an enemy, based not on similarities or dissimilarities, but on the equality of being made in the image of God (Augsburger, 1988; Kierkegaard, 1847/1995; O'Donovan, 1980). As a result, the self and neighbor are viewed as equals—subjective distinctions fade (O'Donovan, 1994) while the view of God's supremacy in His created beings and purposes increases in radiance.

### **Neighbor Love Is Interactive**

The love of God disposes the heart not to miss opportunities to do good toward neighbors, and not to take advantage of any opportunity to do evil (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938). The Spirit of love disposes the heart to do good in both attitude and actions: to be meek in response to injuries as opposed to an angry spirit; to be humble towards others as opposed to an envious or judgmental spirit; and to look after the interests of others as opposed to merely looking out for one's own interests (1 Cor 13:4-7; Edwards, 1852/2000). The interactive nature of neighbor love also involves the awareness, and subsequent action, of being the cause of another's anger. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expands the definition of murder to include the harboring of anger towards another (Matthew 5:21-26). In particular, Jesus points out that if one knows that one is the reason for another's anger, then one, as the offender, needs to delay one's outward act of worship and initiate reconciliation with the one offended (Matt 5:23-24). Therefore, neighbor love includes initiating reconciliation, regardless if the initiator is the offender (Matt 5:23-24) or the offended (Mark 11:25), since such love is a reflection of one's love for God.

Even though the spiritual welfare of the other is of primary importance, neighbor love also includes practical care of bodily needs:

... as occasion serves we must really promote their good to the uttermost of our power; for it is a cold love that will not be at any pains and charges, or hazard any interests, for the sake of those whom we love. That cold love contents itself with wishes, yea, though they are formed into prayers. No, we must not only say, "Be

warmed, be clothed," but really do them good and seek their welfare as we would our own." (Manton, 1997, p. 53)

Jesus emphasizes the importance of meeting the bodily needs of those whom He places in one's path, since "to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even the least of them*, you did it to Me" (Matt 25:40; cf. vv. 31-46).

### **The Divine Math of Love**

The mathematics of divine love is best displayed in neighbor love. Several aspects of loving others defy logic. To start, the "sharing formulas" must be understood. First, neighbor love does not exist unless it is shared (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938). Even though neighbor love is a known quantity, the quantity is zero if not shared. Second, love for others actually multiplies, not diminishes, when shared (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938; Merton, 1978; O'Donovan, 1980). The infinite supply of divine love flows with greater volume when given increased outlets. Next, an "if/then" logic statement applies to a rule of grace—if anyone is to be a recipient of divine grace, then they also have to be an agent of grace. In other words, what is received is given (Volf, 1996). Since love is the sum of all graces, if one receives divine love, then one is obligated to give the love to others. This logic reflects the conditional sayings of Jesus regarding forgiveness, except in reverse order—if one does not forgive others from the heart, then the heavenly Father will not forgive (Matt 6:14-15; 18:35). Another formula of neighbor love that defies logic is, "giving all receives all." From the context of self-denying love, to not seek one's own is the surest way to seek the best for oneself and to receive all things from God (Edwards, 1852/2000). Finally, the rules of community—the more who are involved with divine love, the greater "the enjoyment of God and of one another" (O'Donovan, 1980, p. 114). Even though these "theorems" or "formulas" do not hold up mathematically in the classroom, they add up perfectly in the kingdom of God.

The second half of God's two-fold commandment to love is stringent—

neighbor love is called to love others as one loves oneself. However, under the new covenant, the command to love neighbor is radically altered by Jesus Christ.

### **The New Commandment**

Eliminating any chance to misunderstand or misapply neighbor love, Jesus modified the second aspect of the law of love so that the command might have an objectively known and superior referent—Himself. If the old Mosaic command to love neighbor as self was not challenging enough, Jesus raised the bar of loving others to absolute holiness—“love one another just as I have loved you” (John 13:34; 15:12; cf. Eph 5:2; 1 John 4:11). God’s supreme, costly, impartial, and interactive love displayed on the cross of Christ is now the unparalleled standard for loving others. “To love others as self” was the expectation under the old covenant; however, along with the entrance of the kingdom of God, the new covenant ushered in the eternal standard of loving others, “just as Christ also loved you” (Eph 5:2; Edwards, 1852/2000). The relational standard established for all of eternity is to be followed in the present. Once again, God provides for what He demands.

### **Enemy Love**

God’s law of double love calls for a radical theocentric way of life. By striving to fulfill the law of love, not only will one love self in the best possible way by cleaving to God wholly, but relationships with others will be redemptive so that others might enjoy and be satisfied in supreme Love. In His infinite wisdom and knowledge, God’s commands take into consideration the realities of life in a fallen world. Evil abounds. Enemies emerge in every relational context and are part of living the Christian life. So, does God’s two-fold commandment to love include the call to love enemies? Jesus leaves no room for misinterpretation. Instead of leaving it up to His children to make the connection, Jesus specifically commands His followers to love their enemies (Matt 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36). The sinful self recoils when asked to

understand this concept, let alone submit to the command through obedience from the heart. Selfishness that is rooted deep in the heart, along with an innate sense of a wrong done, reverberates in rebellion to such a command (Carson, 2002; Piper, 1979). In an effort to better understand the continuity in the Lord's two-fold commandment to love with regards to enemy love, several areas will be examined: the Scriptural basis, the relationship of enemy love with self and neighbor love, an eternal and eschatological perspective, and the power of love over evil.

### ***Related Scriptural Teaching***

God's double love command originated in the Old Testament (Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18, 34). Even the object of neighbor love is delineated in Leviticus 19, with loving "neighbor" as self commanded in verse 18, then loving the "alien" as self commanded in verse 34. Nowhere in the Old Testament does God command enemy love, although good deeds toward one's enemies are inferred in Exodus 23:4-5, where one is directed to return or help an enemy's animal. In the narrative in 1 Samuel 24, David exhibits mercy towards Saul who is trying to kill him. Both men recognize that David's restraining grace pleases the Lord (v. 21), and David confesses that he has not sinned against Saul and has "no evil or rebellion" in his hands, despite the numerous murder attempts upon his life (v. 11). Enemy love emanates from this moving account as David remains focused on not sinning against God and his "neighbor." Other passages point to the unrighteousness associated with returning evil for evil (Prov 17:13) and rejoicing with the fall of an enemy (Prov 24:17-20), while other verses speak to the righteousness associated with giving food and drink to the enemy (Prov 25:21-22) and departing from evil and seeking peace (Ps 34:12-16); however, nowhere is enemy love explicitly commanded.

The in-breaking of the eternal kingdom of God, ushered in by Jesus Christ, brought a new covenant of heart transformation, the indwelling Spirit of love, and some

radical relational refinements. In the Sermon on the Mount, right after the Beatitudes, Jesus overturns traditional interpretations of the law that deal with personal relationships: interpersonal strife with no reconciliation, lust in the heart, violations of the marriage covenant through divorce, false vows to God and others, the principle of *lex talionis*, and finally, loving neighbor while hating one's enemy (Matt 5:21-48). Jesus commands enemy love in the last set of challenges and ends the time of teaching with the exhortation to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect. In a parallel account in Luke, Jesus commands enemy love and ends the passage with an exhortation to be merciful, just as the Father is merciful (Luke 6:27-36). Other New Testament passages comprise the paraenetic tradition (Rom 12:14, 17-20; 1 Thess 5:15; 1 Pet 3:9-12) which utilizes the Old Testament passages already referenced, but establishes them in the "new eschatological context" (Piper, 1979, p. 34). Ultimately, Jesus' command to love one's enemies is "a call to experience the power and blessing of the new era which he was bringing" (Piper, 1979, p. 91). Recognizing that enemy love testifies to the present reality of the kingdom to come, how does love for enemy compare with love for self and neighbor?

### ***Relation to Self and Neighbor Love***

God and His Spirit of love are immutable and transcend all issues of temporality. Therefore, the law of love never changes, regardless of the situational context or the individuals involved (Allender & Longman, 1992). One is called to love self in the same manner regardless of one's enemies. In fact, the need to love self in a God-centered, God-pleasing way increases when faced with evil opposition. One is also called to love neighbor, even if the neighbor is an enemy (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995). This radical notion of love makes God's children radically different from the "Gentiles" (non-believers in this context), for even they love those who love them (Matt 5:46-47; Luke 6:32-35). No one is capable of such love; however, the Spirit of

love transforms, enables, and is the very essence of enemy love, as with self and neighbor love. Therefore, “let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good” (Rom 12:9). To love only the “loveable” and the “sinless” is not true love, but is false, hypocritical, and without divine essence. “Abhorring what is evil” includes the evil within one’s own heart that chooses to love only under certain preferential conditions. The real hurt comes not from the violence of an enemy, but from the self-inflicted hurt from not loving an enemy as oneself (Augustine, 1997). “Clinging to what is good” refers to cleaving to God Himself—as in true self-love—and trusting that God’s law of love is best—to include loving one’s enemies.

### ***Involves Eternity***

Enemy love is not possible in one’s own strength—it seems too costly and runs contrary to one’s fleshly tendencies. Is there a perspective that makes enemy love seem attainable, even desirable? The answer to this question is not found in temporality, only in eternity.

What makes enemy love costly? Suffering abounds. Injustice looms everywhere. Consequential pain pulsates. Evil appears victorious. Good deeds and love may be reciprocated with more evil. Enemy love demands self-denial—of bitterness, judgment, envy, pride, and one’s own welfare. God’s option to love just does not add up, does not make sense. The finite mind cannot comprehend such love in the face of adversity.

God’s enemy love requires an eternal perspective, realizing that what is seen and experienced is only a portion of reality. That which is not seen is also reality, but requires supernatural eyes to see. To love, especially in the way God commands, requires faith (Rom 12:19). Considering the momentary suffering of this age as light compared to the eternal weight of glory requires faith (2 Cor 4:17). Trusting in the righteous justice and vengeance of God requires faith. Not losing heart in dealing with

the consequences of evil, knowing that the soul is being renewed day by day by God's Spirit of love, requires faith (2 Cor 4:16). Believing in the promises of God's eternal reward for loving one's enemies requires faith. Finding refuge in the truth that He who dwells in the soul is greater than he who is in the world requires faith (1 John 4:4). The writer of Hebrews captures the essence of the faith that is required for enemy love:

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. (Heb 11:6)

In order to love one's enemies, faith is required to believe that God is who He says He is and rewards those who seek Him, now and for all eternity. Ultimately, enemy love requires faith in the power of God's love over evil.

### ***Power Over Evil***

The call to enemy love is a call to transforming, redeeming love (Piper, 1979). Love is "divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses . . . raised up against the knowledge of God" (2 Cor 10:4). Love is infinite; evil is not. Love is eternal; evil is not. Love is omnipotent; evil is not. Love is God; evil is not. Therefore, divine love will always have the upper hand over evil. The Spirit of love defines enemy love, dictates who is redeemable, and determines the future—evil does not (Augsburger, 1988). God has already determined the future; love, not evil, prevails in redemptive history.

The war of love is unconventional. Enemy love requires a person to fight on the side of the enemy, to administer spiritual first aid to his soul, to ensure bodily provisions are adequate, to desire the enemy to be overcome with good, and for God to bless him. Enemy love introduces transcendence into the fray—God Himself. When God is placed between oneself and the enemy, one is able to step back far enough so that God engages, and enemy love is deployed. The "most beautiful of all victories" is when divine love wins over the enemy, and God uses the lover as His instrument (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995, p. 337).

Enemy love is possible only by the grace of God. Many Christians have loved their enemies in ways that not only impacted them personally, but also thousands of people who witnessed and heard their story. Martin Luther King (1986) lived out enemy love as he led the African Americans during the height of the civil rights movement in the 1960's. The following portion of a speech illustrates the essential points of enemy love in the midst of intense suffering:

To our most bitter opponents we say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because non co-operation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is co-operation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory." Love is the most durable power in the world. This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ, is the most potent instrument available in mankind's quest for peace and security. (pp. 54-55)

Reflecting on the essence of and implications associated with enemy love, a connection can be made with forgiveness. A proper understanding of enemy love paves the roadway for a theocentric understanding of forgiveness.

### **Motives for Loving Like Christ**

What motivates anyone to submit to God's law of love? The Spirit of love brings about the divine desire to love God and others in a way that begins and ends with Love Himself. The Creator of the human soul knows exactly what conditions and demands are required for the redeemed soul to mature and bear good fruit. Specifically, the double love command, which includes enemy love, is God's "seed sown" to produce the fruit of the Spirit (Piper, 1979, p. 110). In addition to divine empowerment, the rewards of love and the addictive nature of love propel one to persevere in loving like Christ.

### ***The Rewards of Love***

God rewards those who love according to His ways. Neighbor/enemy love is costly in the present age, yet is priceless in the age to come. Jesus connects love and reward, “love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great and you will be sons of the Most High” (Luke 6:35). Jesus knows that such love is costly and may very well entail suffering; therefore, He offers the grandest of all prizes – to be the child of the Most High God. To be a child of God has many rewards even while on earth. As part of the free gift of salvation, a child of God is blessed to experience eternal life—intimately knowing God and Jesus Christ whom He sent (John 17:3)—as well as the true love and joy, divine comfort and strength, and incomparable peace and hope that come with being justified by faith in Christ. God delights in lavishing His mercy and grace upon those He loves and goes above and beyond all that we could ever ask or imagine (Eph 3:20). The ultimate reward as a child of the Most High is to spend eternity with Him, abiding in His presence of divine joy and everlasting pleasures (Ps 16:11). Dwelling in the Lord’s presence will be experientially overwhelming, since God created men and women to be most deeply aroused by and satisfied in Him. The glory of the Lord will radiate for an eternity, and His children will be engulfed by the perfection of His love. Jesus adds one additional thought to this particular command—love like God because you are called to be like God, perfect and merciful (Matt 6:48; Luke 6:36). The call to love is a call to holiness. Such love is powerfully addictive (Piper, 1996).

### ***The Addictive Power of God’s Love***

The human soul strives to fulfill the law of double love, not only because of promised rewards found in Scripture, but also due to a supernatural dynamic in the soul, wrought by the Spirit of love (Piper, 1996). The redeemed heart, enlivened by divine grace, develops an insatiable delight in God. When the eyes of the heart get a glimpse of the beauty and splendor of God, the soul becomes captivated and longs for increased

intimacy with God and His righteousness (Ps 73:28). A growing appetite for God's holiness is coupled with a growing desire for personal holiness, which includes a desire to love like Christ (Edwards, 1852/2000). Furthermore, as the power of love works in the soul—creating, conforming, and bringing about community—joy and delight in God increases, and desires for an even greater portion of divine love develops. Piper (1996) succinctly and passionately describes this dynamic within the soul:

We don't want to just *see* the grace of God in all its beauty, saving sinners and sanctifying saints. We want to share the power of that grace. We want to feel it saving. We want to feel it conquer temptation in our lives. We want to feel it using us to save others. But why? Because our joy in God is insatiably greedy. The more you have, the more you want. The more you see, the more you want to see. The more you feel, the more you want to feel. This means that the holy greed for joy in God that wants to see and feel more and more manifestations of his glory will push a person into love. My desire to feel the power of God's grace conquering the pride and selfishness in my life inclines me to behavior that demonstrates the victory of grace, namely love. Genuine love is so contrary to human nature that its presence bears witness to an extraordinary power. The Christian Hedonist pursues love because he is addicted to the experience of that power. He wants to feel more and more of the grace of God reigning in his life. (pp. 119-120)

### *A Debt to Love*

God's law of double love is first understood as a command, but can also be understood as a debt. After finishing a section on a Christian's responsibility to authority with an exhortation to pay off any debt owed (Rom 13:7), Paul proceeds:

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled *the* law. For this, "you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Rom 13:8-10)

The call to love is a debt, or duty, that should always be paid on, but will never be paid off. The duty to love (Manton, 1997) coincides with God's law to love—eternally present, eternally required, since Christ-like love for others fulfills the law of God. God's duty to love is "liberating . . . [and] gives freedom" (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995), as opposed to an oppressive burden that weighs down the soul. The soul is actually strengthened and renewed as the love of God courses through the veins and

issues out to others.

The duty to love yields at least four main implications (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995). First, the counter-intuitive goal is to remain in debt rather than to get out. To remain in debt means to remain in God's love, since the love of God is necessary to fulfill the law of love. Second, the duty to love implies a consistent obligation, despite any changes to the object of love. Again, authentic Christian love is impartial and does not depend on the worth or the "lovability" of the recipient. Third, remaining in debt to love implies that one should love without ceasing, since the love of God is limitless. Only infinite love can fulfill the infinitely holy law of love. Finally, the debt to love must never become an issue of accounting or comparison; if so, the infiniteness of love is reduced to something finite.

### *The Issue of Justice and God's Wrath*

With so much emphasis on love and forgiveness, some questions are rightfully asked, "What about justice?" "What about making the wicked person pay for his wicked deeds?" "What about God's wrath?" "Shouldn't such heinous criminals be punished and held accountable for their actions?" The issues of revenge, justice, and God's wrath are critical issues that must be understood in light of two predominant commands of the new covenant—to love and forgive just as Christ has loved and forgiven (John 13:34; 15:12; Eph 4:32-5:2; Col 3:13). Furthermore, a cohesive understanding of these concepts is essential, since justice and love, holiness and grace within God's character are not at different ends of the spectrum—they are all part of God's united, inseparable nature.

### **Divine Love and Justice**

Human justice should be executed in a timely, temporal fashion to protect the rights of the individual and community. A multitude of judges are charged to rule with wisdom according to the laws of the land (cf. Exod 21:22; 22:8-9). Divine justice,

in contrast, is executed in God's time frame, ultimately at the end of time (Acts 17:21), when every person stands before Jesus Christ (Rom 2:16) and answers for both good and evil done in the flesh (Rom 14:10). One righteous judge, of infinite wisdom and knowledge, will rule and pass sentence on every person based on one law—the law of love. Human justice, as it seeks to protect the “I,” “mine,” “you,” and “yours” within community, “shudders at the revolution of love, as love seeks to do away with “mine” and “yours,” “you” and “I” ” (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995, pp. 265-266). God's paradigm of justice, which has an eschatological framework based on God's righteous judgment (Rom 2:4-5), justifies God's notion of neighbor and enemy love (Piper, 1979). Love does not negate judgment, but “guarantees” judgment as the darkness of sin is illuminated by the beauty of divine love (Morris, 1981). Therefore, the eternal notions of divine love, forgiveness, and judgment obliterate any human understanding of fairness or justice (Morris, 1981).

### **Divine Love and God's Wrath**

The love and wrath of God describe different aspects of the one nature of God (cf. Morris, 1981). While God's love exalts and preserves His holiness for others' enjoyment (Piper, 2003a), God's wrath expresses His fervent hatred of sin (Grudem, 1994). Therefore, God's wrath is divine love's response to sin—the two concepts are consistent, not contradictory. The cross of Christ illustrates the glorious intersection of God's love and wrath. God's abhorrence of the sins of the world could only be satisfied through the sacrifice of the perfect God/man, who gave His life so that others would have eternal life (John 3:16). There is no greater love than one giving his life for another (John 15:13). Furthermore, God's wrath displays the love of God by magnifying the infinite difference between sin and love, remembering God's love as the exaltation and preserving of His holiness for the enjoyment of others.

## A New Paradigm

Under the old covenant, the *lex talionis*—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20)—restrained unjust revenge and protected the sanctity of life and respect for property (Carson, 2002; Moule, 1971). Provisions were given to accommodate the hardness of heart (Moses allowed divorces cf. Matt 19:8). As Jesus ushered in the new kingdom of God, He elucidated the extended depth & breadth of God's concept of justice:

"You have heard that it was said, 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' "But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. "If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. "Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. "Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. (Matt 5:38-42)

If the radical alteration of the *lex talionis* is not enough, Jesus precedes to command not only love for one's neighbors, but also love for one's enemies (Matt 5:43-48). Despite the *lex talionis* being a guiding principle within the civil sphere, Jesus clearly brings about a new relational paradigm. Exposure to the lavish grace, love, and forgiveness of God leads to the creation of a new moral agent, one whose paradigm for relationships, priorities and passions has been reoriented to align with the standards of the eternal kingdom of God (Mackintosh, 1927). Under the new covenant, the new moral agent has a new morality, with a new moral ability and confidence to live in a new moral order. The law of love, to include enemy love, is the relational paradigm associated with the consummated kingdom. Such an extreme notion of relationships serves to expose the depravity of the present world and to give redeemed souls both a vision and a call to live in a way that testifies to the coming kingdom of perfect love (Piper, 1979). God's relational paradigm, nevertheless, does not negate, or rule out, retributive justice. To deny justice would be to deny an undeniable attribute of God. However, the call to love and forgiveness is meant to point to the redemptive love and forgiveness of God that is freely offered through Jesus Christ (cf. Isa 55:1; Rom 6:23).

The survey of divine love is now complete. An understanding of the grand

unifying theme of Scripture—redemptive history, a comprehensive look at the nature and purposes of God’s love, and an examination of God’s two-fold commandment to love provides the foundation necessary for exploring forgiveness from a biblical perspective.

### **Biblical Forgiveness**

The theme of divine forgiveness echoes throughout redemptive history, where God is the primary subject and humanity is the object. God’s forgiveness always deals with the sin that separates humanity from His holiness. A look at the biblical terms used for forgiveness, along with various portraits of forgiveness in Scripture, is helpful in developing a contextual understanding of forgiveness. However, one significant question arises as one reflects upon divine forgiveness as a means of understanding human forgiveness—if only God can forgive sins, then what does He expect from His people when He commands them to forgive, just as Christ has forgiven?

### ***Biblical Terms***

Forgiveness is expressed through a variety of terms. Three broad concepts associated with several explicit terms convey the essence of forgiveness throughout Scripture. The first concept of forgiveness—“to cover,” or “cover over” sins, consistent with the idea of atonement—is conveyed by the Hebrew terms *kipper*, *kasha*, and *kaphar* (Lev 16:29-34; Pss 65:3; 79:9; 85:2; Prov 10:12; Jer 18:23), along with the Greek terms *epikaluptô* and *kalupto* (Rom 4:7; Jas 5:20; 1 Pet 4:8). Next, the concept—“to let go,” or “to release” sin—is captured by the Hebrew term *salach* (“to let go”—Lev 4:20-31; 5:10-26; 19:22), used primarily with the Jewish sacrificial system, and the Greek terms *aphesis* (“dismissal,” “release”—Heb 10:18; Luke 4:18; Eph 1:7) and *luô* (“to set free,” “release”—Rev 1:5). Finally, another concept of forgiveness—“to carry,” or “to send away” sin—is commonly conveyed by the Hebrew term *nasa* (“to

lift up,” “to carry away”—Gen 50:15-21; Exod 34:7; Mic 7:18-19) and the Greek term *aphiemi* (“to send away”—Matt 9:2-6; Matt 12:31-32; Luke 17:3-4; Rom 4:7-8). These three broad concepts of forgiveness offer a visual image of what God does to the sins He forgives; however, Scripture does not limit its portrait of forgiveness to specific terms.

### *Portraits of Forgiveness*

Forgiveness is painted in a variety of ways throughout the Old and New Testaments. Divine forgiveness is captured in a vividly dynamic and powerful manner by using figurative language and narrative. Scripture offers metaphoric strokes to express the essence of divine forgiveness. The psalmist describes the LORD removing the sins of His people as far away as the east is from the west (Ps 103:12). Perhaps one of the most quoted aspect of God’s forgiveness is how He remembers sins no more (Jer 31:34; Isa 43:25). Forgiveness is also graphically depicted as the LORD treading sin under His foot and casting all of the people’s sins into the depths of the sea (Mic 7:18). Paul employs two metaphors in illustrating the forgiveness of sins—sins covered and not taken into account by the LORD (Rom 4:8). Such descriptions are designed to make the human mind reflect deeply about the love and forgiveness of God and respond in worship to the gracious God and Redeemer.

Accounts of divine and human forgiveness abound in Scripture, whether in narrative or parable form. Drama and suspense climax with forgiveness in the long awaited encounters between Jacob and Esau (Gen 3-33), Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 50), the prodigal son and the faithful father (Luke 15), and Jesus’ compassionate confrontation with Peter after the resurrection (John 21:15-17). Forgiveness always results from the lavish mercy of God: symbolized by Noah and the ark (Gen 6-9), the Jewish sacrificial system (Leviticus), David’s adulterous and murderous acts (2 Sam 11-12; Ps 51), David sparing Saul’s life (1 Sam 24), with the idolatrous nation of Israel

(Judges, Ezek 16, Hosea), in the parable of the two debtors (Luke 7:40-43), in the account of the forgiven immoral woman (Luke 7:36-50), in Paul's radical conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), and the parable of the two indebted slaves (Matt 18:23-35). There are many examples of forgiveness found throughout redemptive history. However, the most exquisite portrait of divine forgiveness dwarfs all others, for it displays simplicity beyond comprehension, power through meekness, divinity in humanity, suffering in all of its glory, and love unlike any other. Jesus Christ personifies forgiveness and love, from His incarnation to His death on the cross, to His continual intercession before the Father (Rom 34) as the High Priest of His people (Heb 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-15). The God of the Old Testament breaks into time and space, as Jesus Christ embodies the ageless description of God's glory:

The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and *abounding in lovingkindness* and truth;<sup>7</sup> who keeps *lovingkindness* for thousands, who *forgives iniquity, transgression and sin*; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations. (Exod 34:6-7, italics added)

### ***Only God Forgives Sin***

During Jesus' earthly ministry, He was accused of blasphemy by the Jewish religious leaders for forgiving the sins of a paralytic (Mark 2:1-12). The scribes stated that God alone is able to forgive sins (v. 7). Acknowledging that only God has the authority to forgive sins, what does it mean for humans to forgive another? This is a valid question, since God commands His children to forgive others, just as Christ has forgiven them (Eph 4:32). So the emerging questions are, "Can humans truly forgive, and what does God expect when He commands His people to forgive?"

### **Can Humans Truly Forgive?**

Keeping to the immediate context of Mark 2:1-12, only God is capable of forgiving sins since all sin is ultimately against Him. God designed the perfect sacrifice of Christ as the only means to satisfy His wrath due to sin. Therefore, God is the only

one who can truly forgive; however, God's people are responsible to proclaim the good news of salvation by grace through the forgiveness of sins (John 20:23). Addressing the issue of who can truly forgive sin leads to the next logical question, "What does God expect His people to do in response to His commandment to forgive one another, just as Christ has forgiven them?"

### **What Does God Expect?**

Given that human forgiveness is but a mere shadow of the perfectly justifying forgiveness of a perfectly loving God (Volf, 1996), what does God expect from His children as they strive to obey the command to forgive? Those who address this point offer several answers. What seems to be a classic evangelical response creates a distinction between vertical and horizontal forgiveness (Adams, 1989; MacArthur, 1998; Murray, 1982). Vertical forgiveness represents divine forgiveness, while horizontal forgiveness represents human forgiveness. Since Adams (1989) defines forgiveness as a promise to not bring up the offense to self, others, or to the offender, he holds that brotherly forgiveness fulfills the divine command to forgive. Enright takes a different approach than Adams. Acknowledging that only God can forgive sins, Enright posits a dual aspect of the command to forgive—God forgives the sin, while humanity imitates Him by "drawing the other in love," referencing the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31) as the model for human forgiveness (Enright & The Educational Study Group, 1990, p. 17).

The question still remains, "What does God require when He commands forgiveness, knowing that only He can forgive sins?" To address this critical quandary, the connection between forgiveness and love needs to be examined.

### **Forgiveness and Love**

Jesus' command to love one another just as He has loved is not only consistent with God's two-fold commandment to love, but elevates the standard to

absolute perfection (John 13:34; 15:12; cf. Eph 5:2; 1 John 4:11). The command to forgive one another just as Christ has forgiven (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13) runs parallel with the law of love, at least with reference to Christ. Two major questions demand answers at this point in the discussion—first, the same question as before, “What does God expect when He commands forgiveness?,” knowing that only He can forgive sins, and second, “What is the relationship between forgiveness and divine love?”

### *Scriptural Connection*

The connection between divine love and forgiveness appears throughout redemptive history. The most dramatic and glorious climax of this divine duo is manifested in the cross of Christ—God demonstrated His merciful love towards His enemies (John 3:16; Rom 5:8), forgiving them by the blood shed through the substitutionary, atoning death of Christ (Eph 1:7). Furthermore, the integral relationship of love and forgiveness can be seen most definitively through explicit and implicit Scriptural references (cf. Carson, 2002).

### **Explicit Scriptural Connections**

The close relationship between love and forgiveness is explicitly stated in several passages. In the Old Testament, many passages describe the sovereign and glorious nature of God, including His willingness to forgive iniquities because He delights in everlasting lovingkindness (Exod 34:6-7; Ps 86:5; Mic 7:18-19). With the advent of the new covenant of Jesus Christ, Paul provides some specific instruction on how to live the Christian life—putting off the old self and putting on the new self. With little surprise, Paul teaches that followers of Christ should put on love and forgiveness, just like Christ has loved and forgiven them (Eph 4:32-5:2; Col 3:12-15). In a case of church discipline in Corinth, Paul exhorts believers to restore a fallen brother through forgiveness and love, or else the man would experience excessive sorrow (2 Cor 2:5-11). In Luke 7, Jesus makes a direct connection between forgiveness and love as He

tells the parable of the two debtors (7:41-43) in response to Simon's cutting remark about the "immoral" woman who was lavishing her tears, perfume, and gratitude onto Her Savior (7:36-39; 44-50). Jesus makes the point that the one who has been forgiven much cannot help but love much. In the majority of passages where human forgiveness is juxtaposed with love, the verb *charizomai* is utilized (2 Cor 2:7-11; Col 3:12-15; Eph 4:32; Luke 7:41-43). *Charizomai* conveys the essence of freely bestowing grace or favor (Conzelmann, 1985; Vines, 1966; Zerwick, 1993). Given this meaning for *charizomai*, forgiveness can be understood to resemble divine love—grace freely given for ultimately redemptive purposes, so that those involved might love God more deeply.

### **Implicit Scriptural Connections**

Numerous passages implicitly convey the essence of both love and forgiveness in five main themes—love of enemies, returning evil with good, the covering of sins, issues of unity, and the shedding of blood through self-sacrifice. The passages on enemy love (Matt 5:38-48; Luke 6:27-36) infer forgiveness, since enemies cannot be loved and hated simultaneously. Related to enemy love are the exhortations to return good for evil. Forgiving love is required to override struggles with bitterness and vengeful feelings so that one can bless and pray for one's offenders (1 Cor 4:12; Rom 12:14; 1 Pet 3:9) with a spirit of love (1 Cor 4:21; Rom 12:10; 1 Pet 3:10), a love that does not keep account of a wrong suffered (1 Cor. 13:5), and is marked by a conciliatory spirit (1 Cor 4:13). The covering of sins implies either the forgiveness of sins or love. On one hand, love covers sins (Prov 10:12; 17:9; 1 Pet 4:8). On the other hand, a person is blessed when forgiven, whose sins are covered and not taken into account by God (Rom 4:7-8; cf. 1 Cor 13:5). James 5:19-20 describes how neighbor love strives to save the soul of another and by doing so, covers a multitude of sins. Hence, the concepts of love and forgiveness are interchangeable when discussing the covering of sins. An intimate connection between love and forgiveness is implied in

verses associated with maintaining the unity of the church (Eph 4:1-6; 1 Pet 3:8-12). The call for unity requires patience, tolerance, seeking and pursuing peace, preserving unity, and not returning evil for evil, all which can be described as aspects of love and forgiveness. Finally, the concepts of sacrificial love and forgiveness are inherent in verses describing the unbreakable link between the forgiveness of sins with the shedding of blood (Heb 9:22; Rev 1:5) and the self-sacrifice of Christ (Heb 9:15; 26). Each of these five themes of implied love and forgiveness provide substantial evidence of an intentional link, and even interchange, between the two concepts.

### *Connections Cited in the Field*

The dynamic and distinct relationship between love and forgiveness is clearly seen throughout Scripture. The forgiveness literature draws a close connection between the two concepts as well. Many in the field allude to the connection between love and forgiveness in a variety of ways: utilizing the term “forgiving love” to describe the compassionate aspect of forgiveness (Allender & Longman, 1992; Augsburger, 1988; Geisler, 1973); describing forgiveness as an act or manifestation of love (Adams, 1989; Augsburger, 1988; Brandsma, 1982; Enright et al., 1990; Smedes, 1984; Worthington, 2003); including love as an aspect of the forgiveness process (Augsburger, 1988; Enright, 1996; MacArthur, 1998; Worthington, 2001a, 2003); positing that forgiveness leads to love (Allender & Longman, 1992) or that love, or some form of compassion, leads to forgiveness (Murphy, 2002; Norris, 1984; Shults & Sandage, 2003; Worthington, 2001a); including love in a definition of forgiveness (Allender & Longman, 1992; Hong, 1984; Jones, 1995; Worthington, 2001a); and referring to a Scriptural understanding of love to describe an aspect of forgiveness (Augsburger, 1988; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Shults & Sandage, 2003; Smedes, 1984; Worthington, 2003).

Forgiveness must be understood within the context of redemptive history in general, and within the context of divine love in particular, given the multiplicity of ways in which love and forgiveness are linked in Scripture and written about in the field. The task now at hand is to develop a theocentric definition of forgiveness consistent with God's law of double love.

### ***Forgiveness: A Theocentric Definition***

Several foundational steps are necessary before developing a definition of forgiveness. First, a survey of the "developing" commandments to love and forgive sheds additional reflection on an understanding of forgiveness within the context of love. Second, a reiteration of divine love provides the critical foundation for forgiveness. Third, an examination of the inextricable connection between love and forgiveness in light of sin and grace offers additional. Finally, after developing the definition of forgiveness, the definition must be compared with God's law of love—His two-fold commandment to love, including Jesus' new commandment and His command to love one's enemies—to ensure its consistency with the relational mandate for His everlasting kingdom.

#### **A Survey from Old to New Testament**

A global survey of God's explicit commands to love and forgive is helpful in better understanding forgiveness within redemptive history and the context of love. Beginning in the Old Testament, the *Shema* is the traditional passage that reminds the Jewish nation that there is only one God and they are commanded to love the Lord with all of their heart, soul, and might (Deut 6:4-5). Commands to love another as oneself are also common: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18; 34); "show your love to the aliens" (Deut 10:19). God does not specifically command His people to forgive others in the Old Testament; however, there are limited occurrences where a person is asked to forgive another. For instance, Joseph's brothers report that their father wants

him to “Please forgive . . . the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong. And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father” (Gen 50:17). Additionally, Abigail asks David for forgiveness, since her husband Nabal refused to help David and his men in time of need (1 Sam 25:28). Ironically, there are at least three occasions where individuals specifically pray for God not to forgive the wicked or oppressors (Neh 4:5; Isa 2:9; Jer 18:23). Moreover, Jonah expressed extreme dismay at the Lord’s willingness to show mercy and forgiveness towards the people of Nineveh after they believed in God and repented. One can easily come away confused about the mixture of love and hate found in the Old Testament (Piper, 1979), especially highlighted in the way the psalmists pray against their enemies with righteous indignation in the imprecatory Psalms (i.e., Ps. 35, 69, 109). Such mixture of love and hate in the Old Testament is related to an old covenant ethic with its civil and ceremonial laws. On the contrary, in the New Testament, Jesus Christ explicitly warns His followers of the consequences of not forgiving, “If you do not forgive . . . the Lord will not forgive you” (Matt 6:5; 18:35; Mark 11:28).

During His incarnational ministry, Jesus Christ modified the Old Testament command of neighbor love by issuing a new command to love one another just as He has loved (John 13:34; 15:12). Furthermore, Jesus took the command to love others to increased heights, instructing His followers to love even their enemies. Providentially, after Christ died for His enemies, Paul issued the divinely inspired commands to forgive and love others, just as Christ has forgiven and loved (Eph 4:32-5:2; Col 3:12-14). The sequence seems intentional. The resultant commands of the new covenant are without question rooted in the Old Testament commands to love (cf. 1 John 2:7); however, the addition of the commands to forgive and to love as Christ points to a radically new relational paradigm ushered in and made possible by the new covenant established by Christ Himself.

In the Old Testament, God is the subject in passages which explicitly connect

love and forgiveness, whereas in the New Testament passages linking love and forgiveness, the children of God are the subjects, as they are exhorted to love and forgive like Christ. This switch in subjects associated with love and forgiveness is accompanied by the enabling Spirit of God working in and through the redeemed souls of His children. In summary, Christians are called in the present to abide by the holy standards of love and forgiveness associated with the future eternal kingdom of God (Piper, 1979). The divine, indwelling Spirit of love enables God's people to love and forgive in supernatural ways like Christ.

### **Divine Love in Review**

Love is supremely divine, meaning that love has all the attributes of divinity and is the supreme grace, since God is love. Love is costly, as demonstrated by the death of Christ on the cross for the forgiveness of His enemies. Love is impartial, the worth and value of love is not found in the object of love, but is associated with the subject of divine love, God Himself. Love is interactive, always beginning with God, who takes the initiative in working out His eternal purposes, and always ends with God, in worship and glory. The works, or purposes, of love are three-fold—creatively redeeming hearts by infusing the beauty and power of divine love, conforming souls to increasing Christ-likeness by weakening the forces of sin and fanning the flames of righteousness, and bringing the children of God into community to live and love in the present, in preparation for their future union with Christ in the kingdom to come. God's law of double love is the relational paradigm set for all of eternity. The standard of love is absolute holiness, as God commands His children to love as Christ has loved, and to love enemies as a way to imitate the perfect and merciful heavenly Father.

### **Sin and Grace**

From God's perspective, love and forgiveness are closely linked because of the sin of humanity (cf. Allender & Longman, 1992) and the grace of God. A brief

discussion of both sin and grace explains how forgiveness is rooted in, enabled by, and purposed for redemptive love.

Approaching love and forgiveness in reference to sin yields at least two inferences. First, because love existed before the emergence of sin and will continue to exist after sin's demise, a unique aspect of love is revealed within the reality of sin. Forgiveness is required when love and sin collide. Moreover, divine love is described in terms of Christ giving His life for the forgiveness of sin (John 15:13; 1 John 3:16). In other words, a unique aspect of love in the fallen world is seen through the costly forgiveness of sins (cf. Jones, 1995), which leads those who are forgiven to experience the joy of knowing God and finding ultimate satisfaction in Him. Second, the relationship between love and forgiveness can be examined by starting with a definition of sin. If sin is defined as a failure to love (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938; cf. Carson, 2002; Crabb, 1988; Geisler, 1973), then divine love is the most powerful weapon against sin. Furthermore, if love is equated with costly forgiveness, as displayed in the cross of Christ, then costly forgiveness is love's most powerful weapon against sin (cf. Smedes, 1984). In other words, forgiveness is the divine love of God at work in the redemptive battle against sin—a battle where love prevails and sin is overcome, ultimately defeating death through the cross of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:54-57).

Divine grace is another way in which love and forgiveness is understood. Salvation is a grace of God (Eph 2:8; Rom 6:23). Therefore, the forgiveness of sins (Eph 1:7) is a work of grace (Eph 2:5-8; cf. Shults & Sandage, 2003). If divine love is the supreme grace—the sum of all of God's graces—then the grace of forgiveness is rooted in love and may be defined as a means to the ultimate grace of love, for love is the more excellent end (Edwards, 1998). This line of logic substantiates the previous discussion about the link between love and forgiveness as seen in the verb *charizomai* (see p. 115). Because of the nature of divine love, love actually enables forgiveness,

since “love is long-suffering, love is kind, . . . does not act unbecomingly, does not seek its own, is not provoked, and does not take into account a wrong suffered” (1 Cor 13:4-5). Moreover, love covers sins (Prov 10:12; 17:9; 1 Pet 4:8). Consequently, in the dynamic work of the Spirit of God, love overcomes the power of sin to bring about forgiveness, which results in an increased love for God and others. Stated another way, the grace of forgiveness is rooted in and enabled by the grace of love, resulting in redemptive love in the face of sin.

### **A Theocentric Definition of Forgiveness**

The intimate interaction between love and forgiveness cannot be ignored. The keys to understanding forgiveness within the context of love involve the issues of sin and the costly nature of divine love. Divine love within the realm of humanity is understood as the love of God at work in and through the redeemed human soul:

*Love is a work of God in the human soul that compels one to give oneself for another, regardless of the cost, so that the other might love God more deeply.*

Love within the Trinity has no cost at all, but divine love extended towards humanity is costly due to sin. One can love others in many situations and incur nominal costs. However, the cost to love increases significantly when one is directly sinned against. Acknowledging the eternity and unconditional nature of God’s law of love, including enemy love, forgiveness is understood as God’s love at work in and through the redeemed human soul, enabling love for another, despite being sinned against (cf. Brandsma, 1982, Burnaby, 1938; Enright et al., 1990; Hong, 1984; Morris, 1981; Worthington, 2003):

*Forgiveness is a work of God’s love in the human soul that compels one to give oneself for another, despite being sinned against, so that the other might love God more deeply.*

There is not a single word, nor a single work, that would unequivocally and unconditionally demonstrate that divine love abides in a person. However, when a person loves his enemies, prays for them, and moves towards them in love, then it might

be certain that the love of God abides in that person who lovingly forgives (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995; cf. Carson, 2002). Forgiving love involves the costly forgiveness of sins. Given that only God can forgive sins, human forgiveness is understood as costly love given for the spiritual welfare of the other and reflects the call to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-20; cf. McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1995; Piper, 1979). Such love imitates the love of Christ. Human forgiveness that “covers” sin for the purpose of redeeming love mirrors God’s forgiveness that covers sin with the blood of Christ for the purpose of creative, conforming, and communing love. The cost to love may not require the giving of one’s life, but definitely involves denying oneself, or taking up one’s cross, for the sake of Christ (Matt 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23).

In practical terms, whenever an offender asks another for forgiveness, what is really being asked is, “Will you love me in spite of how I have sinned against you?” When the offended person agrees to forgive the other, what is really being stated is, “I will continue to love you, in spite of the sin, so that my (Christ-like) love will encourage you to love God more deeply.” Corrie Ten Boom’s testimony (1974) of how she was able to forgive a former Nazi guard contains some of the essential aspects of divine love and forgiveness:

Jesus. I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness. As I took his hand, mechanically, woodenly, a most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives along with the command, the love itself. (pp. 53-55)

### **Forgiveness and the Law of Love**

Where does forgiveness fit in with God’s law of love and with Jesus’ new commandment (John 13:34; 15:12)? Forgiveness is rooted in the command to love others as self (cf. MacArthur, 1998; Manton, 1997; Worthington, 2003). The presented

definition of forgiveness runs parallel to the notion of neighbor and enemy love:

*Forgiveness is a work of God's love in the human soul that compels one to give oneself for another, despite being sinned against, so that the other might love God more deeply.*

However, the above definition can be modified in a form similar to Jesus' new commandment: *Forgiveness is to love another despite being sinned against, just as Christ has loved.* This shortened definition is the same in content as the longer version; however, the issues of God's love at work in the soul, the giving of oneself for another, and the redemptive purpose that the other might love God more deeply must all be assumed in the phrase, "just as Christ has loved."

Jesus' command to love one another is the overarching law of kingdom relationships, whereas forgiveness is a subset of the global command to love. There are many instances when followers of Christ should move towards others in love when the only sin involved may be the sin in one's own heart. Christ-like love is required in every relationship especially as believers are called to seek another's welfare before their own (Phil 2:3-5). However, the love demanded by God becomes more costly when one is sinned against by another. God's law of love still applies—love is required, but the cost for one to love increases. Given the reality of sinful offenses, the definition of forgiveness can be abbreviated even more. Jesus' command in the Gospels is an accurate summary of forgiveness: *Love your enemies* (Matt 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36). Enemy love encapsulates every aspect of forgiveness—requires divine love working in and through the forgiver, necessitates moving towards the other, involves dealing with the costly nature of sin, entails a redemptive purpose, and follows the paradigm of Christ's love. Enemy love beautifully illustrates a significant aspect of how Christians are called to live in a fallen world according to the eternal relational paradigm modeled and commanded by Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion

A theocentric definition of forgiveness depends on the context of both redemptive history and the law of love. The grand unifying theme of God's history provides beautiful portraits of divine love and forgiveness, while an in-depth understanding of God's love and His law of love enables the development of a God-centered understanding of forgiveness rooted in the supreme grace of love. The temporality of forgiveness plays a vital role in helping God's people live out the eternal, relational laws despite the reality of sin, while the eternity of love accomplishes its creative, conforming, and communing work in redeemed souls to increase love all the more for the glory of God.

The developed definition of forgiveness will now be used to address the various aspects of forgiveness presented in chapter 1. It is hoped that the definition of forgiveness, based on the law of love, will clarify, simplify, and unify the myriad of issues surrounding forgiveness.

CHAPTER 3  
TOWARDS A THEOCENTRIC UNDERSTANDING  
OF FORGIVENESS

A theocentric definition of forgiveness, consistent with God's redemptive history and derived from God's two-fold commandment to love, begins and ends with the love of God. A theocentric definition of forgiveness provides the necessary structure and purpose, along with clarity and cohesion, to the field's variant positions discussed in chapter 1. The goal of this chapter is to re-address the twelve major issues of forgiveness in light of the newly developed definition of forgiveness. In addressing each of the twelve areas, the major points in the field are assessed with the lens of Scripture to see how the literature is consistent and inconsistent with a biblical worldview. The theocentric paradigm of divine love and forgiveness developed in chapter 2 serves as a foundation for a theocentric understanding of each particular aspect of forgiveness, utilizing relevant information from the field, as well as other insights derived from a biblical perspective. Finally, in light of the individualistic bias of the therapeutic models, each aspect of forgiveness is examined from the perspective of Christian community. A theocentric understanding of forgiveness must be consistent with God's eternal relational paradigm and must take seriously the significance of the body of Christ. Before getting underway, a global assessment of the major doctrinal omissions within the forgiveness literature is offered to serve as an initial orientation for the task at hand.

### The Major Omissions

The researchers in the field have produced many good insights about human forgiveness, especially within the last two decades. However, many forgiveness models are intentionally designed for universal application (Enright, 2001; Worthington, 2001a), thus requiring that they avoid the particular perspective of the Christian community. The difficulty in such an approach is that key Christian doctrines associated with forgiveness will be neglected, likely leading to distortion in our understanding. Given the prevailing secular presuppositions, God is not central in the current models of forgiveness. Moreover, the biblical doctrine of sin and the person of Christ, which significantly influence how one understands and approaches forgiveness, are two additional considerations relevant to the subject of forgiveness that are left out of current discussions.

A paradigm of forgiveness without God as the focal point not only withdraws forgiveness from its originating context, but also fails to emphasize God's attributes, namely His love and holiness. Even though the concept of other-centered love is included in some of the models of forgiveness, the fullness of biblical love is not realized or conveyed when discussed apart from God Himself. Given this point, it is easy to survey the field and understand forgiveness as the supreme virtue above that of love. Moreover, a model of forgiveness that lacks focus on the holiness of God finds itself severely misdirected. Jones (1995) is the main voice in the field who explicitly espouses the link between forgiveness and the pursuit of holiness; however, for the vast majority of the field, humanistic and moralistic motives for expressing a forgiving love dominate.

The absence of sin in the forgiveness literature is not evident at first, given that much is discussed in terms of "the offense," "the wrongdoing," and "the evil and hurtful" experiences suffered by those who are struggling to forgive. From a humanistic standpoint, the interpersonal offense is covered in great detail; however, the

concept of biblical sin is rarely articulated in equivalent depth or breadth. Why is it critical to integrate the biblical understanding of sin in developing a model of forgiveness? There are several ways in which the doctrine of sin can influence a model of forgiveness. First, human forgiveness is necessary because of the existence of sin—committed primarily within interpersonal contexts. Therefore, the significance, consequences, and implications of sin should be addressed in any model of forgiveness. Second, the concept of sin is easily seen in the motives and the attitude of the offender; however, there is little discussion about the sin associated with the resentment, bitterness, and anger of the person struggling with unforgiveness. Sin associated with unforgiveness plays a key issue in discussing the choice to forgive and the issues of timing. The majority of the literature describes unforgiveness in either emotional or cognitive terms, not in terms of sin. Consequently, the majority of the literature does not deal with psychological readiness and personal healing within the context of a person's spiritual condition. Finally, the presence of sin in the hearts of both the offended and offender is also a valuable issue in understanding the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation.

The reality of Jesus Christ in the life of the believer is another significant omission in the field of forgiveness. Christ is obviously absent from the majority of empirical and clinical work, due primarily to the universal, modern psychological approach. Even in the more pastoral works, where there is significant emphasis on the past work of Christ as Savior and Redeemer, there is less emphasis on the present dynamics of Christ working in the soul of the person struggling with unforgiveness. But what is the significance of not including Christ in a forgiveness model? There are several essential aspects of dealing with forgiveness that are missing when considered apart from Christ. First, without Christ, the foundation of forgiveness lacks substance. The forgiveness of sin is at the core of redemption (Eph 1:7; Luke 1:77). Forgiveness is not a human tradition or concept, but is a dynamic initiated by God at the very

beginning of creation after the Fall of man, and is supremely manifested in the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross. Therefore, without the centrality of Christ, a model of forgiveness is deficient, distorted, and deceptive. Second, without Christ, human-centered benefits become the primary motives to forgive. God intentionally gave His people specific commands to forgive, just as Christ forgave His children (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13). Without this divine mandate, it is easy to deviate from God's purposes in every aspect of forgiveness—from debating whether forgiveness is a choice, to questioning the necessary virtues for forgiveness. The theocentric benefits of human forgiveness include the delight it brings to both God (1 Sam 15:22; Prov 11:20) and the one who forgives (Pss 1:2; 40:8; 119:35), and serves as a manifestation of one's love for God (John 14:15). Third, without the perspective of Christ, in particular His eternal relational paradigm and His body, there is a propensity to lose sight of the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation. Fourth, without Christ, the desire and ability to forgive seems next to impossible. A model of forgiveness is woefully anemic without real reliance upon Christ—as a source of strength to persevere, as a source of relief for the overwhelming burden resulting from deep relational hurt, and as a source of hope while learning how to love sacrificially on the heavenward journey.

Given this brief exposition of the major omissions, any model of forgiveness developed and defined apart from God, without inclusion of a biblical understanding of sin, and without the centrality of Christ, is far different from a theocentric model. Attempting to understand and carry out forgiveness apart from the God of Scripture is both cruel and incomplete. A godless approach to forgiveness is cruel since one is expected to forgive another by one's own resources, with no bigger picture than one's own story, and no objective guidelines or principles. A godless approach to forgiveness is incomplete because forgiveness is not only about getting over emotions or repairing relationships, but more importantly, it deals with a growing conformity to the will and image of Christ, pleasing Him by delighting in His ways.

## **Developing the Major Issues of Forgiveness**

With the field of forgiveness surveyed and a biblical understanding of love and forgiveness developed, it is now time to take the theocentric definition of forgiveness and develop a unified understanding of forgiveness after addressing each of the major issues. Given the limited scope of this chapter, the following discussion of each aspect of forgiveness is not comprehensive in depth or breadth but is a critical first step in giving shape and substance to the definition of forgiveness offered in chapter 2.

### ***Issue One: Unforgiveness***

Unforgiveness is a powerful dynamic in the human soul. Individual lives, interpersonal relationships, and communities are impacted by the negative thoughts and emotions of one struggling with the pain, shame, and injustice from a relational offense. A right understanding of unforgiveness provides the necessary insight to help one move towards forgiveness.

#### **The Issue Viewed Theocentrically**

The forgiveness literature extensively covers the emotional and cognitive aspects of unforgiveness. Such efforts give credence to the holistic complexities of the created being by exploring how relational transgressions impact the human soul and recognizing that the emotions and cognitions significantly influence behavior. Emotions are part of the created design of human beings. Jesus Christ cried when He saw Mary and friends mourning over the death of Lazarus (John 11:35), displayed righteous anger as He overturned the money changer's tables (Matt 21:12; Mark 11:5; John 2:15), and responded with soul-disturbing anguish as He anticipated the horrendous suffering associated with His work on the cross (Matt 26:38; 27:46; Luke 22:44; 23:46). However, a radically theocentric notion of living is demonstrated through the life and death of Jesus Christ. Unparalleled meekness is seen in how Jesus responds to heretical accusations, hate-driven humiliation, brutal beatings, and

ultimately, a shameful death through crucifixion (Isa 53:7). Unmatched selflessness is seen as He intercedes for the forgiveness of His transgressors (Isa 53:12; Luke 23:34) as He purposely gave His life for the sake of His enemies. Truly, the standard for living in the fallen world is set by Jesus Christ.

The challenge arises in placing inevitable relational offenses within the realm of God's call to love and forgive like Christ. Fortunately, God's call is always accompanied by His provisions. The love of God, which is long-suffering, kind, not provoked, does not seek its own interests, nor take into account a wrong suffered (1 Cor 13:4-5), courses through the soul of every redeemed individual. A call to such love immediately locates the emotional responses of bitterness, hatred, and thoughts of revenge in the wicked abyss of the human heart (Jer 17:9; Mark 7:21-23). Moreover, resistance to forgiveness cannot overcome the power of divine love that supernaturally works in the human soul. The supreme grace of love causes redeemed individuals to remember the immensity of their own forgiveness, to recoil at their great sinfulness contrasted with God's holiness, and to repent of sins linked not only with unforgiveness, but also with the ongoing offenses against God and others. Mortal resistance to forgiveness has no recourse to God's efficacious work in the soul as divine love inclines the heart to forgive as Christ has forgiven (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13) and to love one's enemies as Jesus instructed (Matt 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36). The dominance of divine love at work in the redeemed soul sounds fine at the theoretical level, but appears unrealistic and even cruel in its demands for obedience. This very real tension is discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.

Suffice to say at this juncture, chronic unforgiveness is a sinful response to being sinned against (cf. DiBlasio, 2002). The bitterness, avoidance, and hatred directed towards the offender are antithetical to forgiveness (cf. Smedes, 1996) and the call to love (cf. Exline & Baumeister, 2000). Therefore, the failure to love when sinned against is at the core of unforgiveness. From another perspective, forgiveness takes the

life out of sin, while unforgiveness nourishes sin (Kierkegaard, 1847/1946). Given the theocentric definition of forgiveness, the only explanation for the offended to be compelled to move redemptively towards the offender is the love of God at work in a sanctifying manner in and through the hurt and broken soul, according to His timing and through His prompting. The action and attitude of the offended moving towards the offender with the love of God requires supernatural grace and is reflective of the love and forgiveness of Christ.

### **Communal Considerations**

Bitterness, resentment, anger, and hatred are some of the outgrowth from the rapid-growing vine of unforgiveness. The overgrowth serves to keep others at a distance, especially the offender. The massive vines overshadow the one struggling with unforgiveness, causing the roots of love (Eph 3:17) to weaken, and specifically the roots of neighbor love to diminish. Roots of enemy love are nowhere to be found. Consequently, the one overwhelmed with unforgiveness becomes like a lone, encapsulated tree in the middle of the community grove, extending nothing towards the offender and becoming less loving to others in general. Continual rumination about the situation draws the roots inward, resulting in a tangled growth of selfish love that consumes its own life. Simply stated, unforgiveness not only results in disunity within the body of Christ, but hinders one's relationship with God (1 John 4:20-21), as well as the way one loves oneself and others. Unforgiveness is contrary to God's relational paradigm associated with the kingdom of heaven.

The roots of true self-love are designed to grow in relationship with others through neighbor love and to grow particularly hearty in connection with enemy love. The work of divine love in the human soul removes the overgrowth of unforgiveness and allows the roots of love to produce flowering foliage that covers a multitude of sins.

### *Issue Two: Forgiveness as an Option*

Is forgiveness a personal option or a requirement of God? Despite the fundamental nature of this issue at the theoretical level, difficulty in dealing with this question emerges in the all too realistic chaos of emotions and thoughts associated with unforgiveness. The horrendous nature of the offense and offender raises the stakes of forgiveness. The issue of whether forgiveness is optional is communicated either explicitly or implicitly by the way a counselor helps another work through the pain and trauma of an offense.

#### **The Issue Viewed Theocentrically**

The concept that forgiveness is a choice is consistent with a biblical worldview in one sense: Human beings are created with wills that enable them to make decisions and determine their purposes and goals in life. Such volitional capabilities make people moral agents, who know right from wrong and are accountable for every decision in life.

Even though God's commands require absolute compliance, men and women have the ability to choose; however, the critical distinction that is not consistently highlighted in the field is that failure to obey God's command to forgive is willful disobedience and rebellion against Him. The notion that forgiveness is optional is foreign to a scriptural understanding. Even in the Old Testament, Scripture is clear in exhorting one to keep from unforgiveness and instead, love one's neighbor as oneself:

You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD. (Lev 19:17-18)

Viewing forgiveness as a choice places humanity on the throne of authority, allowing people to no longer be submissive to the transcendent, authoritative will of God. It is true that a person cannot be made to forgive; however, the choice to forgive is not the issue found in Scripture. The real issue at stake, when facing the ugliness of sin and its

hurtful consequences, is whether a person will choose to seek, trust, and obey God.

Another aspect not explicitly addressed in much of the literature is the supernatural disposition of the heart redeemed by the love of God. The ongoing work of God disposes the human heart to love righteousness and hate unrighteousness. A heart pulsating with the love of God possesses the attributes of divine love (1 Cor 13) and yields good fruit (Gal 5:22-23). All this to say, the human soul, alive with Christ, inevitably senses the leading of the Spirit of love and submits by faith to His loving requirement to love and forgive, just as Christ has loved and forgiven. In spite of their apparent contradiction to human reasoning, God's commands are designed to cause the soul to flourish with deep roots of faith, hope, and love.

Christ's fulfillment of the Law, along with the grace associated with salvation, does not give a person the freedom to oppose God's will for forgiveness. Under the new covenant, followers of Christ are exhorted to forgive since God's law of love subsumes forgiveness. Even though God is cognizant of and compassionate towards those struggling with unforgiveness, His relational standards associated with the kingdom are eternal and absolute, consistent with His holiness and love. However, having stated the standards of God's holiness, the amazing beauty and grace of the Gospel shines forth in spite of the realities of the redeemed soul's struggle with unforgiveness—a mixture of sinfulness, created goodness, and regenerated attributes. The richness of God's mercy and His great love is steadfast in the midst of the deep, soulful laboring to love. In other words, God knows the anguish of one struggling to forgive, yet is patient and purposeful in bringing about good from what was meant for evil (cf. Gen 50:20) through the eventual, sanctifying process of forgiveness.

### **Communal Considerations**

Given the waywardness of the human soul, a community characterized by division is inevitable if forgiveness is left to the will of individuals. God's command to

forgive one's offender exposes the sins of self-protection, self-righteousness, and self-centeredness present in every human heart. Each of these sins hinders unity within the body of Christ. Moreover, the call for God's people to love and forgive helps them realize they are designed to grow in community, for the building up of the body in love.

### ***Issue Three: Motives to Forgive***

There is a motive behind everything that is done, even forgiveness.

Motivation is especially useful when one is faced with a difficult task or process. But what motivates the offended to forgive his offender? Since forgiveness occurs within relational contexts, forgiveness is relationally motivated as well—one's relationship with God and others.

### **The Issue Viewed Theocentrically**

The forgiveness literature, critiqued for its individual therapeutic bias, spends significant effort addressing the personal benefits achieved by forgiveness. These therapeutic benefits, which serve to motivate the offended to forgive, are of true value. Moreover, major contributors in the field cite other motives which include the welfare of others and, to a lesser extent, one's relationship with God. However, being motivated to forgive for purely humanistic reasons runs counter to a theocentric understanding of forgiveness. True biblical forgiveness has God as the primary motive since God's love is the starting point, the source, and the goal of forgiveness. Therefore, forgiveness motivated by mere personal reasons or even for the sake of the relationship, is associated with a superficial created self-love, as well as an anthropocentric notion of neighbor/enemy love. Furthermore, purely therapeutic motives to forgive fall short of God's design for several reasons: The God-given purposes of suffering associated with God's redemptive work are missed; the eternal rewards of true forgiveness are not recognized; and ultimately, the forgiveness offered does not fulfill God's law of love.

## **Communal Considerations**

Individualized motives for forgiveness add nothing to building community. Motives that consider the welfare of the other, as well as restoration of the relationship, realize significant steps towards community. However, only forgiveness fueled by the love of God and aimed at bringing the other into a deeper relationship with God, results in true spiritual community rooted and grounded in divine love.

### ***Issue Four: The Virtues of Forgiveness***

Research indicates that certain virtues are conducive to forgiveness. Empathy and humility, the two main virtues most widely heralded, are said to facilitate forgiveness, while the virtues of other-centered love and the ability to accept and absorb pain are less widely advocated. Identifying the virtues relevant to forgiveness is important in knowing how to move a person from unforgiveness to forgiveness. Given the tendency to look solely at the character flaws of the offender, this particular issue of forgiveness requires an honest assessment of the character and heart of the one who has been offended.

### **The Issue Viewed Theocentrically**

The four prevailing virtues linked with forgiveness are biblically substantiated. As a means of developing empathy towards the other, most approaches to forgiveness emphasize seeing the offender as a person with inherent worth. An empathetic perspective is essential in developing a heart of forgiveness. To see every human being as equal in worth is consistent with a biblical anthropology—everyone has inherent value based on being made in the image of God. Emphasizing humility as a virtue of forgiveness also aligns with a theocentric paradigm. Christians are called to love in a way that is not arrogant (1 Cor 13:4), considers others as more important than themselves (Phil 2:3), and displays a heart of humility (Col 3:12; 1 Pet 5:5). The virtues of other-centered love and the capacity to absorb the pain, or biblical meekness—which

includes the concepts of long-suffering and gentleness (Num 12:1-3; Matt 5:5 cf. Ps 37:1-11; 1 Cor 13:4; Jas 1:19-21; 3:13, 17; Gal 6:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:21-25), are consistent also with divine love.

The alignment of these four virtues with Scriptural concepts is encouraging; however, given the anthropocentric orientation of the majority of the forgiveness field, the discussions of such virtues are not presented in reference to God's nature or purposes. As depicted in the literature, these virtues are a reflection of emotional and moral maturity (e.g., Enright's developmental model of forgiveness, Enright & Gassin, 1992; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) and that an increased knowledge of the other or of oneself are the key components of developing empathy and humility. Yes, empathy and humility are associated with maturity and increased knowledge, but these virtues are ultimately a reflection of Christ—of His attitude and ways. Discussing empathy and humility apart from the fruits of the Spirit of God results in concepts that are but a shell of their more substantive biblical referents.

The sense of empathy found in the forgiveness literature is a shadow of the biblical terms for love, mercy, and compassion. Understanding the soul of another, especially the soul of an enemy, is characteristic of divine love and is the result of its efficacious work. Therefore, empathy is derived from experiencing the love of God, realizing that the only thing that makes one different from any other is God's amazing grace, and desiring that others might taste and experience the goodness of God. Moreover, empathetic care and concern are at the heart of neighbor and enemy love. True humility results from comprehending the infinite distance between oneself and God, in both his "greatness" and "loveliness" (Edwards, 1852/2000, p. 135). Ultimately, humility is a manifestation of the presence and work of divine love in the human soul. Other-centered love cannot be understood as anything other than the love of God working in and through a person. When the discussion of the virtues of forgiveness stop with the human concepts of altruistic or moral love alone, the presence

and work of divine love is undermined at best, and neglected at worst.

The fourth virtue that is catalytic for forgiveness is the ability to absorb pain, or meekness. Meekness, an aspect of divine love (1 Cor 13:4), is characterized by an absorbent, persevering disposition, that never ceases to love one's neighbor, or enemy, in spite of the magnitude, frequency, or duration of injury. Meek love also bears all suffering for the sake of Christ (1 Cor 13:7). However, there is another critical aspect of meekness that must be understood since merely absorbing the pain received from others is not only impossible for the human soul to bear alone, but is not part of God's compassionate design. As gloriously demonstrated by Christ on the cross, God takes on the sins and burdens of His enemies so that they might have life. Similarly, when God's people are called to love neighbor and enemy despite being sinned against, He does not forsake them or leave them to their own resources. God sustains His children by His powerful grace (2 Cor 12:9-10), and Christ Himself invites them to come and roll their burdens over to Him (Matt 11:28-30; Ps 37:5), for He delights in giving rest to weary and heavy souls. This sanctifying pattern of suffering for the sake of Christ, then seeking Christ for solace and satisfaction, intensifies one's intimacy with Him and is an important aspect of theocentric forgiveness. The dynamics and implications of meekness are discussed in chapter 4 as part of working towards a Christian psychology of forgiveness.

The virtues associated with forgiveness can be considered various aspects of divine love. The virtues of empathy, humility, other-centeredness, and meekness develop as the heart is creatively conformed by the love of God. A heart disposed to Christ-like love yields spiritual fruit that enables love for one's neighbors and enemies. Therefore, a heart of love has an increased propensity to forgive like Christ.

### **Communal Considerations**

The four main virtues associated with forgiveness are all attributes of divine

love; thus they all work towards the unity and the building up of the body in love (Eph 4:2, 16), while fulfilling God's law of love. Community flourishes with the fruit of the Spirit as divine love works in and through redeemed souls so that others around them develop a deeper passion for Christ. Considering the realities of life in a fallen world, forgiveness is paramount in fostering care for one another, bearing one another's burdens, and covering sin so that love prevails.

### *Issue Five: The Conditions for Forgiveness*

The question of whether human forgiveness is contingent on the offender's response—repentance, signs of remorse, or contrition—does not divide the field of forgiveness research, but, for the most part, divides the psychological researchers (Cunningham, 1985; DiBlasio, 1999, 2000; Enright & Zell, 1989b; Enright, 2001; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Hargrave, 1994—concerning exoneration; Krause & Ellison, 2003; North, 1998; Shults & Sandage, 2003; Smedes, 1984; Worthington, 2003) from a number of evangelical writers (Adams, 1989; Blomberg, 1992; Calvin, 1996a; Murray, 1982; Whitney, 2002). However, there are also well-known Christian writers who contend that human forgiveness is unconditional (Allender, 1992, 1999b; Carson, 2002; Hampton, 1988; Hong, 1984; Jones, 1995; Kendall, 2002; Kierkegaard, 1847/1995; Piper, 1979; Schaeffer, 1970; Stanley, 1991; Volf, 1996). The chasm is caused by confusion surrounding one fundamental question, "What does God require of men and women when He commands them to forgive others?" Matthew 18:15-20 and Luke 17:3-4 are referenced to support the position that human forgiveness demands the repentance of the offender before forgiveness is granted. Proponents of unconditional forgiveness utilize other Scriptural passages to support their position (cf. Mark 11:25; Matt 5:44; 6:12; 18:35; Luke 15:11-32; 23:34; Acts 7:60; Eph 4:32; Col 3:13).

### **The Issue Viewed Theocentrically**

Even though unconditional forgiveness is most often asserted for human-

centered reasons in the empirical and clinical areas, there are some in the field who support such a position for reasons associated with Christ-like love (Enright & The Educational Study Group, 1990; Worthington, 2003). As argued in chapter 2,

*Forgiveness is a work of God's love in the human soul that compels one to give oneself for another, despite being sinned against, so that the other might love God more deeply.*

A concise answer to the crucial question, “What does God’s command to forgive require, knowing that only He can forgive sins?” is love—God expects His children to love neighbors and enemies alike, despite being sinned against. The call to forgive is a call to love, enabled by His Spirit of love. Love’s covering of sin reflects how God’s forgiveness covers sins. Therefore, forgiveness is unconditional and consistent with God’s law of neighbor and enemy love (cf. Enright et al., 1990; Kierkegaard, 1847/1995; Piper, 1979; Volf, 1996), which is unconditional and is redemptive in purpose. In a similar vein to those who argue for unconditional forgiveness for humanistic reasons, Kierkegaard’s radical position (1847/1995) accentuates the unconditional nature of love and forgiveness for divine reasons:

. . . long before the enemy thinks of seeking agreement, the loving one is already in agreement with him. . . . In the absolute sense, to forgive is not the conciliatory spirit if forgiveness is asked for; but it is the conciliatory spirit to need to forgive already when the other perhaps has not had the slightest thought of seeking forgiveness. (pp. 335-336)

### **Communal Considerations**

Unconditional forgiveness, analogous with the unconditional love that God bestows upon His redeemed people, is optimal for community. Beyond theological issues, natural objections to unconditional forgiveness raise concerns about condoning the offense and the offender, offering “cheap” forgiveness, since the offender is not required to do anything, or increasing the chances of a repeat offense. Such objections have a ring of justice in the background. Each of these objections can undermine community if the concerns are substantiated; however, since unconditional forgiveness is consistent with God’s law of love, one can trust that such an approach to forgiveness

builds up community in love. Nevertheless, unconditional forgiveness does not negate church discipline (cf. Matt 18:15-20) and the legal consequences connected with the offense(s). All in all, unconditional forgiveness requires faith in the creating, conforming, and communing love of God applied to the human soul.

### ***Issue Six: The Laterality of Forgiveness***

To what degree is the offended and offender involved in the forgiveness process? This particular matter is located in between two key issues—the conditionality of forgiveness and the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation. As with the other aspects of forgiveness, this issue is addressed by utilizing a theocentric framework of love and forgiveness.

#### **The Issue Viewed Theocentrically**

Forgiveness, based on a theocentric understanding of God's two-fold commandment to love, is not optional and is independent of the action or attitudes of the offender. Moreover, forgiveness and reconciliation are distinct steps towards building community. However, forgiveness should not be automatically considered a unilateral process because such an approach narrows the understanding of forgiveness to a mere individualistic, therapeutic notion. Neither should forgiveness be considered purely a bilateral dynamic, given that forgiveness is not a function of the offender's action or attitude. So is forgiveness unilateral or bilateral? Neither. Human forgiveness is bi-dimensional—requiring the offended to do the work of forgiveness in two different dimensions.

The dynamics of forgiveness involves both the intrapsychic and interpersonal realms (cf. Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998). From the definition of forgiveness, there is a definite work of God in the soul as the offender strives to move from a disposition mostly characterized by unforgiveness towards a disposition mostly characterized by forgiveness and love. To limit the forgiveness process at the

intrapsychic level jeopardizes the work of love, not only in the soul of the offended, but as experienced by the offender. As the offended is compelled by God to move towards the other with a redemptive purpose, the Spirit of love does His perfecting work in the forgiver who is able to love despite being sinned against. Thus, forgiveness, understood as neighbor or enemy love, requires an interpersonal aspect. The combination of “private” and “public” aspects of love and forgiveness is seen in the paraenetic passages (Matt 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36; Rom 12:9-21). Praying for and blessing one’s enemies is done in private before God and issues from “a pure heart, a clear conscience, and a sincere faith” (1 Tim 1:5; cf. Matt 18:35). However, these passages imply that interaction is also expected (Piper, 1979)—public greeting of one’s enemy (Matt 5:47), treating an enemy in the same way that one would like to be treated (Luke 6:31), and feeding one’s enemy, returning evil with good (Rom 12:20-21). Forgiveness should issue from the heart and move redemptively towards the other, for the sake of the other, and not for the sake of self. In cases where it is either impossible or not feasible to interact with the offender, forgiveness should still issue from the heart and be expressed, perhaps, through faithful prayers for the soul of the offender.

### **Communal Considerations**

Forgiveness flowing from the heart and working interpersonally through love builds community. Private “forgiveness” without public “love” has little to no redemptive impact and limited therapeutic value. Public “love” without private “forgiveness” is hypocritical. In summary, even though forgiveness is brought about through the internal work of the Spirit of love, the resultant neighbor/enemy love exists only as it is shared externally with others (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938).

### ***Issue Seven: Forgiveness and Reconciliation***

Why is the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation addressed in every literary work on forgiveness? The ultimate question that typically emerges is

whether forgiveness should result in the reconciliation between the offended and the offender. This question is captured by three prevailing scenarios: (1) The offended forgives but has no desire to re-establish the relationship with the offender, even if the offender is repentant, (2) the offended forgives and is willing to reconcile, yet the offender may not be repentant and not interested in reconciliation, or (3) the offended may forgive the offender, but the other is no longer alive or accessible. In order to answer this vital question, some more implications of the theocentric definitions of love and forgiveness are examined.

### **The Issue Viewed Theocentrically**

The researchers and clinicians' caution and emphatic efforts to separate forgiveness from reconciliation are with good motive—to avoid forcing the offended back into a relationship where trust is broken and one may be subject to further emotional and/or physical injury. Moreover, by making forgiveness independent of reconciliation, the offended can move from the bondage of unforgiveness and reap the benefits of forgiveness, regardless of the actions and attitude of the offender. However, the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation needs to be understood within the context of redemptive history and needs to be consistent with God's law of love.

Up to this point in the development of understanding forgiveness, unforgiveness has been identified as sin since it is a failure to love neighbor/enemy. Therefore, forgiveness is not optional, nor is it conditional on the actions and attitude of the offender. The overarching motive to forgive is love, so that the offender might love God more deeply. Forgiveness also entails an internal work of God in the soul which works redemptively within an interpersonal context. Not only is the spiritual welfare of the offender in mind, but also the offender's relationship with God and the offended. Referencing God's pattern in salvation, forgiveness flows out of divine love, so that not only involved individuals are reconciled, but the offender is reconciled with God

(Adams, 1989; Allender, 1999b; Augsburg, 1996; Mackintosh, 1927). As with God's initiative in salvation and reconciliation, those who are called to love and forgive like Christ, are also called to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17-21), initiating reconciliation with others as a result of receiving unmerited grace and mercy themselves (Augsburger, 1996; Kierkegaard, 1847/1995). The notion of reconciliation being initiated by the offended person runs contrary to human justice and human nature, yet it is the necessary practical outworking of neighbor/enemy love and is consistent with God's relational paradigm for His new kingdom (cf. Mark 11:25). Scripture also highlights the urgency and importance for an offender to initiate reconciliation, inferring that relational rift—specifically in this context, when one is responsible for invoking anger in another—interferes with worship (Matt 5:23-24) and impacts community. Discussing the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation cannot stop at an individual perspective, or even at the one-on-one level, but is understood most fully within the context of community.

### **Communal Considerations**

Reconciliation is consistent with the theocentric definitions of love and forgiveness, along with the numerous exhortations to reconcile with God and others (Eph 2:11-21; Col 1:20-22; 2 Cor 5:18-21), to be at peace with one another ( Jas 3:17-18; 1 Pet 3:11), to love one another (John 15:12; 1 John 4:7; Rom 13:8), and to be one body (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:12-27; Eph 4:4) since Christians are all members of the body of Christ. In thinking about individual scenarios, one might draw one set of conclusions; however, if the same scenarios are considered within the context of the body of Christ, then different conclusions might be drawn. Scripture is clear that God desires unity within His body and is equally clear that sin significantly impacts oneness—sin separates one from God and from one another. Therefore, forgiveness understood as the ability to love another despite being sinned against, is the preeminent

weapon against sin and the resultant disunity and strife within the body of Christ (Mackintosh, 1927). The same call to forgive and reconcile applies if the offender is an unbeliever since such love serves as an unmistakable testimony to Christ's love. In summary, reconciliation is the restoration of community once broken by sin (Augsburger, 1996) and is the fruit of forgiving love.

Any model of forgiveness must be shaped first by God's law of love, then "tested" within the realities of life. The three scenarios mentioned earlier should be evaluated based on the current understanding of reconciliation. Before going any further, Smedes' (1996) strong caution is warranted to keep a proper perspective:

Forgiving may enable us to bear up under and even to surmount intolerable abuse that people do to us when we cannot escape it. But it can never, should never, shall never, transform *intolerable* wrong into *tolerable* pain. (p. 155, italics added)

In the first scenario, the offended claims that she has forgiven her offender but does not desire to reconcile with him. In the infinite wisdom of God and the mystery that is associated with doing His will, faith is required to submit to His law of love (enemy love), trusting that His ways are true and will lead to life. In true forgiveness, God's enabling Spirit compels her to share divine love with her offender in practical measures—greeting him, not avoiding him; blessing him, not cursing him; sharing the goodness of God with Him, not wishing him to eternal damnation. She is called to initiate reconciliation as part of her forgiveness, realizing that it will be up to God to do a similar work in the offender's soul to bring about reconciliation. However, in a manner that is unexplainable, God uses His love that is manifested through her forgiveness and initiated reconciliation in a way that "transforms" the souls of all involved. The second scenario, where the offended has truly forgiven and initiates reconciliation, but the offender does not repent or desire to reconcile, is equally challenging. In spite of the offended doing everything God calls him to do, there is still the factor of the offender's hardened heart. The offended should make consistent efforts to show Christ-like love while trusting in the Lord's timing and ways to bring

about a change of heart in the offender. The offended is called to keep the doors open to reconciliation in the future as the Lord works. The third scenario, where the offender is no longer accessible due to death or loss of contact, calls for nothing different on her part regarding forgiveness, except she will not be able to move towards the offender in an effort to reconcile. In the case where the offender is no longer accessible, she can maintain a willingness to reconcile, perhaps expressed through her prayers for the spiritual welfare of his soul, but she should move on with her life, having grown deeper in her intimacy and identity with Christ from her painful experience. In each of these general scenarios, forgiveness and efforts to reconcile must be relentlessly Christ-like, for the sake of unity and peace within His body, or as an extraordinary testimony to true Love. No one is able to love in such counter-intuitive ways without the Spirit of love working in and through the redeemed soul to bring about God's divine purposes.

#### *Issue Eight: Types of Forgiveness*

Surveying the forgiveness literature reveals many types of forgiveness. The various types of forgiveness found in the literature can be divided into two broad categories—grouped either by the process dynamics or by the purposes of forgiveness. What category will the theocentric definition fall under and will multiple types of forgiveness still be necessary?

#### **The Issue Viewed Theocentrically**

Forgiveness clearly has divine origins, divine meaning, and divine demonstrations. Attempting to understand forgiveness apart from God's revelation found in Scripture risks not only widely divergent points of understanding, but inevitably, a wrong understanding of the divine example. The value of developing a definition of forgiveness from the contexts of God's redemptive history and His two-fold commandment to love is that the resultant understanding is unified, comprehensive, and consistent with God, His ways and purposes. There are two specific reasons why

various kinds of forgiveness exist in the literature: a varying exegesis of scriptural texts and a varying exegesis of the human soul.

### *Varying Exegesis of Scripture*

Pastoral writers take great effort to derive a right meaning of forgiveness from the biblical texts. The general methodology to understanding human forgiveness is to focus on passages that contain explicit terms for forgiveness and to refer to the divine model of forgiveness. First, focusing on passages which contain explicit terms for forgiveness, as well as metaphors used to describe forgiveness—cancellation of debt, covering of sin, or to release, let go, or send away—is a good starting place. However, such an approach should not limit one's understanding of the whole counsel of God, since many texts which implicitly allude to forgiveness may give a nuanced understanding. Specifically, the concepts of God's love and the His two-fold commandment to love play a critical role in developing a right understanding of forgiveness. Moreover, the use of proof texts such as Luke 17:3-4 to support the notion that forgiveness is conditional on repentance leads to a wrong conclusion. For example, the Lukan passage is used to support conditional repentance, even though the passage is really addressing the urgent and repeated need to forgive a brother in Christ for the sake of reconciliation (Stein, 1992), in the spirit of the Lord's prayer (Luke 11:4). Hermeneutically, a doctrine should not be developed from a single or select group of passages, but the doctrine should emerge from a full-orbed understanding of all of Scripture, including all other relevant doctrines. Continuing with the example of the conditionality of forgiveness, a theocentric understanding of love and God's law of love, coupled with other passages (Matt 5:44; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:27-36; Acts 7:60), enables one to conclude that human forgiveness is not conditional on the response of the offender. Second, developing an understanding of human forgiveness based on the divine model is necessary, but there is a critical question that must be asked and

addressed, “If God is the only one who can forgive sins, what does He expect from His children when He commands them to forgive?” From the analysis in chapter 2, the answer to this pivotal question is that God expects His children to love despite being sinned against, consistent with His law of love.

### *Varying Exegesis of the Soul*

Researchers and clinicians take great effort to derive a right understanding of unforgiveness and forgiveness from “exegeting” the human soul. Within a secular, humanistic approach, the struggles of human beings are examined in great clinical detail. Consequently, most forgiveness models in the field focus, with varying emphases, on cognition, volition, and affect of the offended. However, the realities and dynamics of human suffering considered apart from a divine referent produce a limited understanding of the underlying struggles associated with unforgiveness and forgiveness. Modern psychology’s exegesis of the soul captures significant realities of soul dynamics but does so in isolation from the spiritual realities of the Creator and Redeemer at work within the human soul. Thus, the resultant understanding of the forgiveness not only yields various types of forgiveness but also produces an incomplete understanding of the dynamics associated with forgiveness. Clinical research, operating from a variety of presuppositions regarding forgiveness, result in divergent positions and types of forgiveness, as well as the inability to agree on a single definition of forgiveness (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000; Worthington, 1998).

Understanding forgiveness within the context of divine love, however, eliminates the need to produce multiple types of forgiveness to account for the spectrum of scenarios and contexts of life. God’s law of love is explicit. The referents to love and forgive like Christ are clear. Christ’s call to enemy love gives clear insight and boundaries in understanding forgiveness. Defining and understanding human

forgiveness on the basis and purpose of divine love cuts to the heart of the matter. To forgive from the heart (Matt 18:35) and to love from a pure heart (1 Tim 1:5; 1 Pet 1:22) are essentially the same when placed within the context of living in a fallen world. Therefore, different types of forgiveness can be eradicated because there is only one divine love.

### **Communal Considerations**

A theocentric definition of forgiveness describes only one type of human forgiveness—one which is grounded in love and rooted in community. Communal unity requires an overarching emphasis on redemptive relationships that are reflective and reliant upon the love of God. Moreover, the standard of Christ-like love (John 13:34; Eph 5:1-2) and forgiveness (cf. Eph 4:32; Col 3:13) comprises the essence of the building up of the body as a means of preparing the bride for the return of Christ. Ultimately, the community of Christ calls for a single understanding of forgiveness characterized by a oneness of body, Spirit, hope, faith, baptism, and “God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:1-6).

### ***Issue Nine: Forgiving God***

Forgiving God is generally offered in connection with a means of breaking free from unforgiveness. Specifically, God is utilized as a scapegoat, or as an object of blame, for the bitterness that results from struggling with the cruelties of life. How should this issue be viewed from a theocentric perspective?

### **The Issue Viewed Theocentrically**

The notion that one is to forgive God in order to achieve psychological relief is an unbiblical concept found in the forgiveness literature. This issue typically arises out of one’s anger towards God for His providential involvement in personal sufferings—this type of anger is never warranted and “is a most horribly wicked kind of

anger” (Edwards, 1852/2000, p. 190). As an example, Kendall contends people should forgive God, “though He is not guilty,” to release any bitterness and resentment towards Him for the evil and suffering they experience in the world (2002, p. 33). Why should God be forgiven for one’s encounter with evil? A biblical response is just the opposite of what Kendall suggests. One needs to ask God for forgiveness and the wisdom and grace to see life as He sees it—all as a part of His redemptive history. People should never blame God for evil temptations and experiences (Jas 1:13-14). God is never culpable for evil, only people are culpable as they are ruled by their sinful hearts (Jer 17:9; Jas 4:1-4) and the evil forces ruling the world (Eph 2:1-3). The concept of forgiving God, generated by a therapeutic mindset as a way to lessen the pain and suffering of individuals, illustrates the propensity of human beings to supplant God as the sovereign ruler of the universe.

Consistent with those in the field who oppose the concept of forgiving God, the theocentric definition of forgiveness does not allow God to be the object of forgiveness. The perfect love of God is what brings about the work of forgiveness in the human soul. Therefore, it is inconceivable that God’s love might work within Himself to redemptively cover sins (which He is incapable of committing), so He can love Himself more deeply (impossible since He is infinite love). The conventional argument—God is sinless; therefore, He never needs to be forgiven—is more than sufficient. Advocating that God can be forgiven reveals not only a distorted understanding of God and His attributes, but also reveals a wrong understanding of forgiveness.

### **Communal Considerations**

Given the concept of forgiving God is false and heretical, there is no need to discuss the communal aspects of this particular view. However, if the concept is true, then the foundation for community is non-existent, given that God is true love and the

individual members of the body of Christ are rooted and grounded in love (Eph 3:17; 4:16).

### ***Issue Ten: The Timing of Forgiveness***

Any discussion about the timing of forgiveness must address two major aspects. First, the issue of when forgiveness should be introduced within the counseling process is of vital concern. Second, the question of whether forgiveness is an event or a process is critical. In order to address these two aspects of timing, the previous aspects of forgiveness must be considered. The following discussion addresses the fundamental issues surrounding the issue of timing; however, a more-in-depth discussion is presented in chapter 4 in the sections dealing with the dynamics of unforgiveness and the process of moving from unforgiveness to forgiveness.

#### **The Issue Viewed Theocentrically**

The majority of researchers in the field take seriously the importance of helping the offended work through the hurtful memories and the attached painful emotions. Such detailed work acknowledges the significance of sin's painful consequences and notes the human soul's created response to suffering. No one in the field desires that forgiveness be coerced, insincere, or used as a tool for manipulation. Advocating the necessary time to deal with the emotions and to develop a different perspective for the offense and the offender are also key aspects of a theocentric model.

There are several insights that can be gained by looking at the issue of timing from a theocentric standpoint. Even though unforgiveness is a human response to hurt and injustice, chronic negative thoughts and emotions towards the offender serve to harden the heart and keep the offended from neighbor/enemy love. Research indicates that vengeful rumination is inversely proportional to forgiveness (Root, McCullough, & Bono, 2004; Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2004). Thus, unforgiveness is a sin against God and against the offender, becoming a "second order

dysfunction” over the original offense (DiBlasio, 2002, p. 6). Given the nature of unforgiveness, a significant question must be factored into the timing equation—how does one handle the tension between the time needed to work with a heart in bondage to the painful emotions of the past and the urgency of working with a heart hardened by vengeful rumination? Another question that is helpful in thinking through the timing issue is whether a person can move towards forgiveness too quickly in an attempt to be obedient to God’s commands to love and forgive? Can a follower of Christ be hurt or disadvantaged by seeking refuge in Christ, without working through all of one’s emotions? Is it detrimental to one’s emotional health to give up heavy and wearisome burdens and hurts to Christ in order to find rest in Him?

Knowing that forgiveness is not optional, the counselor needs to address the issue of forgiveness sooner or later. The counselee must be given biblical instruction about forgiveness, so she knows that forgiveness is not optional. The counselor should remember that by delaying the issue of forgiveness, the counselee is not given the opportunity to choose the path of forgiveness, assuming inauthentic efforts to forgive—for purposes of self-protection or repression—is not God’s pathway of forgiveness. The work of the Holy Spirit can be hindered in the counseling process by not addressing the biblical call to love and forgive, and as a counselor, one can act duplicitously in perpetuating the counselee’s sin of unforgiveness (DiBlasio, 1999, 2000, 2002). Therefore, a more important issue than timing should be what is the best way to help the offended recognize the debilitating effects of unforgiveness, not only within one’s own soul, but also on one’s relationship with God and others?

To ask someone to change his mind about how he feels or thinks about the offender out of dutiful obedience to a moral law is both insensitive and infeasible. What motivates anyone to move from unforgiveness to forgiveness? Granted, after months, or even years, of agonizing over a past hurt, he might be willing to do anything to relieve the pain and suffering. However, is personal relief the primary motive for

forgiving? The key motive to forgiveness originates in the forgiveness that one experiences from God, for salvation and sanctification. Jesus points out that one who has been forgiven much loves much (Luke 7:37). The Spirit of love, dwelling within every redeemed soul (Rom 5:5), brings about an increasing awareness of one's own sinfulness—against God and others—and of God's enduring lovingkindness. Specifically, a deep motivation to forgive others develops when a person begins to grasp the magnitude and the frequency of her sins against God in light of His long-suffering love, compared to how she is sinned against by others (cf. Cunningham, 1985). A heart, transformed by divine love and compelled by the dynamic work of God, is disposed towards loving others according to His law of love. Therefore, the timing of forgiveness should not be the primary emphasis, but rather understanding what keeps a person from loving God and how best to love himself in Christ during the painful time of suffering. Eventually, after seeing a greater glimpse of the unmerited grace and the unconditional love received through Christ, the Spirit of love turns a person's heart towards what truly pleases God and what will result in eternal blessings—loving one's enemy.

The virtues that enable forgiveness from the heart are not commodities that can be purchased for use. However, the righteous virtues that flow from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and a sincere faith come only from God; thus, the supply is infinite and is readily accessible since the Spirit of the Lord dwells in every redeemed soul. Yet, a heart hardened by the sin of unforgiveness needs to be softened by the Spirit of love for the heart to regain its regenerated rhythm that resonates with God's heartbeat. Empathy and humility are important virtues as identified by research; however, love is the key virtue since divine love is the supreme grace of God. So the question becomes, not when should forgiveness be introduced, but how best to thaw the cold heart and reestablish the flame of divine love that comes about through a renewed, intimate relationship with God—"for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen,

cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). There is another aspect of divine love that must be specifically addressed—meekness. What can be done to increase meekness, or the ability to accept and absorb the pain, then turning it over to Christ? Can Christ-like meekness be detrimental to mental health? Does unforgiveness actually undermine the development of meekness and the other virtues of divine love? How does one counsel another, who is deeply broken from habitual abuse, in terms of biblical meekness?

The unconditional aspect of forgiveness enables the offended to proceed at his own pace, independent of the actions and attitudes of the offender. Faith is certainly required to press on with forgiveness in spite of missing or unknown variables—such as the repentance of the offender and the possibility of a repeated offense. Rather than focus on the timing issue, it is more profitable to help the counselee rest in God’s sovereignty since a key component of unconditional forgiveness is knowing and trusting in God’s perfect vengeance and wrath that will be carried out, if not in the immediate present, ultimately on judgment day (cf. Allison, 2005; Carson, 2002). Justice is never satisfied through temporal human means, but is achieved completely by the one true righteous Judge, Christ Himself.

The significant realities of true biblical forgiveness involve an intrapsychic process prompted by the work of God’s Spirit of love, along with an interpersonal dimension that involves good deeds towards one’s enemy. The bi-dimensional aspect of forgiveness, coupled with the preceding issues, points to forgiveness as being a process that includes definite times of willfulness to follow God’s call to love and forgive like Christ. Repeated, intentional decisions to forgive are required for two main reasons: The Spirit in the human soul is willing but the flesh is weak (Matt 26:41; Mark 14:38; cf. Rom 7:14-25), and the hurtful memories and the negative emotions associated with the offense repeatedly challenge the human heart and mind. When Peter asks Jesus how many times should a person forgive another, Jesus’ response

implies that there is no limit to forgiving another (Matt 18:21-22). This passage is helpful in dealing not only with repeated offenses, but also in dealing with reoccurring remembrances of the same offense that trigger the sin of unforgiveness in the heart. Patient longsuffering is an essential element of divine love.

In summary, forgiveness is a process of developing a heart of love, which involves repeated decisions to love and forgive. Therefore, the timing issue of forgiveness does not revolve around answering the question of when forgiveness is introduced as an intervention, but rather around the exploration and guidance of the counselee's heart. One of the goals of counseling is to help the counselee to see his own story within the larger context of redemptive history, specifically dealing with God's law of love associated with the new covenant and His coming kingdom.

### **Communal Considerations**

Festering unforgiveness brings division within community. The unity of the body of Christ is paramount and is not given second place to any individual (cf. Carson, 2002). Scripture calls for direct, loving confrontation in dealing with situations where sin results in division among the people of God (Matt 18:15-20; Mark 11:25; Eph 4:31-5:2; Col 3:12-15). In the case of an offender who has been disciplined by the church, the members are exhorted to forgive and comfort him as a way of reaffirming their love for him, so he does not experience excessive sorrow (2 Cor 2:5-11).

Even though the church of Christ is more important than individual relationships, it is the quality and genuineness of the individual relationships that gives strength to the body. In other words, with regards to the timing and process of forgiveness, there needs to be consideration for the real brokenness of the souls within the church and authentic forgiveness from the heart (cf. Matt 18:35). The key to strengthening and edifying every soul is helping one to love God more passionately and to love others so that they too love God more deeply—this is best done in relationship,

both individually and in the corporate body within increasing spheres of influence. Therefore, care and sensitivity should be given to persons struggling with unforgiveness, while at the same time, encouraging them to give their burdens over to Christ, resting in Him, and finding soul restoration in His abiding presence.

### ***Issue Eleven: What Forgiveness is Not***

Most in the field agree on what forgiveness is not (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000) and describe these concepts by using terms that discount the offense or the offender—pardoning, denying, excusing, or condoning the wrongdoing or the wrongdoer. Another significant slant used to describe what forgiveness is not, discounts the emotions and memories of the offended—forgiveness means that one should forget the offense. Taking a step back, the point of both of these perspectives is the protection of the inherent worth of the offended and the inherent rightness of justice. Is there anything that a theocentric perspective might add or subtract from the consensus of the field?

### **The Issue Viewed Theocentrically**

In the discussion of what forgiveness is not, there is a consistent emphasis on the reality and moral wrong of the offense. The seriousness in which the offense is handled is consistent with the seriousness of sin. Despite the stated concerns associated with what forgiveness is not, one can infer from a biblical paradigm that respect for God and His moral order is at stake. Moreover, the emphasis on the just treatment of the offended reflects the due dignity and value of every human being, even though justice is not the intended goal of forgiveness.

More than likely, the concept that forgiveness is equal to “forgetting” originated from passages that place the concept of God “not remembering” the sins of His people in parallel with His “forgiveness” of sins (Jer 31:34; Isa 43:25; Heb 8:12). Contextually, God “not remembering” the sins of His people should not be interpreted

as “forgetting,” as in “absent from memory,” but should be interpreted that He does not hold the people’s sins against them because of their forgiveness in Christ. Moreover, God’s omniscience does not allow Him to “forget” the sins of His people, evidenced by the fact that they will stand and answer for all of their actions on the Day of Judgment (Rom 14:10, 12; 2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:12-13).

Given a theocentric understanding of love and forgiveness, there are two additional aspects closely associated with the notion of forgiveness and forgetting. First, forgiveness does not mean forgetting the offense, but forgiveness does require forgetting oneself in order to love the other (cf. Jones, 1995). Such self-denial is central to God-centered love and forgiveness and is the cost of being a disciple of Jesus Christ (Matt 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). The closest the forgiveness literature comes to this concept of self-denial is the development of empathy toward the offender, humility, and letting go of the emotions associated with unforgiveness, all for the sake of offering the free gift of forgiveness to the offender. As already explained in great detail, the self-sacrifice of theocentric love and forgiveness is motivated by loving and forgiving like Christ. Second, in a slightly different nuance compared to the literature, forgiving does not mean forgetting the wrongdoing, but forgiveness does mean covering the sins of the offender so that the offended can move towards the other with redemptive love. The covering of sin does not deny the wickedness of the sinful offense or the guilt of the wrongdoer, or else there would be no need for covering. Kierkegaard (1847/1995) explains the issue of covering sin through love and forgiveness with clarity:

The one who loves forgives in this way: He forgives, he forgets, he blots out the sin, in love he turns toward the one he forgives; but when he turns toward him, he of course cannot see what is lying behind his back. (p. 296)

The covering of sin is most beautifully explained and demonstrated through the cross, on which God the Father covered the sins of His people with the blood of Christ for the purpose of redemption (Rom 4:7; cf. Eph 1:7).

## **Communal Considerations**

The concepts of what forgiveness is not undermine true community because they do not represent true forgiveness and love. Moreover, pseudo-forgiveness undercuts the trust, honor, and true love in one's relationship with God and others. However, the theocentric realities of self-denying love and the covering of sins are the foundation and building blocks of the body of Christ and the essence of biblical human forgiveness.

### ***Issue Twelve: The Essence of Forgiveness***

After dissecting forgiveness into its various aspects, it is time to reassemble the package to examine forgiveness as a whole. Even though forgiveness has already been defined based on a theocentric understanding of love and God's law of love, this particular section provides a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of forgiveness.

### **The Issue Viewed Theocentrically**

The groundwork for understanding forgiveness has been laid—redemptive history sets the stage, divine love provides the substance, and God's two-fold commandment to love establishes the relational structure. The integral components of forgiveness must include the concepts of God's love (the essence of forgiveness), the human soul (the primary context for the work of divine love), sin (the reason forgiveness is necessary), cost or sacrifice (an attribute of divine love, manifested when love redemptively encounters sin), movement towards the offender (the fact that love exists only if shared), and redemptive purpose (the intended outworking of forgiveness consistent with God's salvific paradigm). The theocentric definition of forgiveness is derived from a theocentric definition of divine love in the presence of sin:

*Forgiveness is a work of God's love in the human soul that compels one to give oneself for another, despite being sinned against, so that the other might love God more deeply.*

The definition incorporates the various aspects of forgiveness brought out in the literature. Each section of the definition is expanded to provide a detailed commentary of what theocentric forgiveness is.

### ***A Work of God's Love***

Theocentric forgiveness originates in, works from, and ends with God and His infinite, perfect love. Love is the supreme divine grace and is the most efficacious weapon against sin (cf. Allender, 1999b; MacArthur, 1998). God's Spirit of love is implanted in the redeemed heart (Rom 5:5) and works in the human soul to bring about increasing conformity to God's will and ways. The dual dynamic of God's love at work in the soul and one working out one's own salvation in fear and trembling (Phil 2:12-13) with regards to unforgiveness, is the process of sanctification. Authentic forgiveness requires a faith that believes that only the love of God can bring about a radical change in one's own soul, as well as the soul of the offender, through the process of forgiveness—from God and towards others.

### ***In the Human Soul***

The modern psychological works on forgiveness merely capture the soul dynamics of the created self, but fails to capture comprehensively the dynamics associated with the fallen and redeemed self, with respects to the supernatural realm of good and evil. God's love does its perfecting work in the human soul (Phil 1:6; 2:13; 1 John 4:12), battling the strongholds opposed to the truths of God and "taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor 10:3-5). This renewing of the mind includes the change of negative thoughts and emotions associated with moving from unforgiveness to forgiveness (Cunningham, 1985; Enright, 2000, 2001; Hampton, 1988; McCullough, 2001; Murphy, 1988; Shults & Sandage, 2003; Worthington, 2001a, 2003) since love does not rejoice in unrighteousness (1 Cor 13:6). Another aspect of God's perfecting work is an increasing awareness of and distaste for one's own sin (cf.

Cunningham, 1985). The awareness of increasing distance between God and oneself in the moral and natural realms brings about increased humility (Edwards, 1852/2000). Moreover, the putting off of the old fleshly self and the putting on of the new spiritual self is a continual dynamic that characterizes the sanctifying work of God's love in the redeemed soul. As God's love continues to purify the heart, there is an increasing disposition to actions and attitudes that are congruent with neighbor/enemy love. The efficacious work of divine love in the soul not only yields forgiveness, but also the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Striving to forgive like Christ is synonymous with pursuing holiness (Jones, 1995; Pargament & Rye, 1998) and is the most poignant manifestation of divine love working in the soul (cf. Enright & Gassin, 1992). Ultimately, forgiveness is the "consummate expression of Christ-likeness" (MacArthur, 1998, p. 92).

### ***That Compels One***

Forgiveness flows from the redeemed soul as God's love does its perfecting work. Genuine transformation takes place when one is compelled to forgive, not out of mere moral obligation, but out of one's love for God and concern for the spiritual condition of the other's soul. Enemy love flows from a pure heart, out of joy, gratitude, and a love for righteousness, initiated not by any conditional responses on the part of the offender, but initiated by the love of God and for the love for God. Regarding the volitional aspect of forgiveness, forgiveness involves submitting to the will of God (Adams, 1989; Boom, 1974; Cunningham, 1985; DiBlasio, 1999, 2000, 2002; Enright, 2000; MacArthur, 1998; Worthington, 2003) for the sake of one's relationship with God. As one travels the path of forgiveness seventy times seven, the offering of redemptive love for the spiritual welfare of others becomes more a way of life (Hong, 1984; Jones, 1995; Pargament & Rye, 1998) than a distinct act or process.

### ***To Give Oneself***

The most radical attribute of theocentric love and forgiveness is self-denial. In God's divine wisdom, the way of ensuring the best for oneself is to deny oneself, trusting in the faithfulness and lovingkindness of God (Edwards, 1852/2000; Kierkegaard, 1847/1995; Morris, 1981). The losing of self to gain an abundant life in Christ is the greatest paradox of human existence and is thoroughly God-centered. God's two-fold commandment to love confronts and challenges the human tendency for selfish, preferential love. To give oneself for the sake of another through forgiving love follows the supreme example of Christ and fulfills God's purpose in suffering—to know Christ more intimately (Phil 3:10; cf. Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000).

### ***To Another***

The other-centeredness of divine love and forgiveness joins individuals with God and one another (cf. Cunningham, 1985; Patton, 2000) and serves as the driving force that leads to restoration and reconciliation (Allender, 1999b; Augsburger, 1988; Jones, 1995; Hampton, 1988; Hargrave, 1994; Kierkegaard, 1847/1995; Worthington, 2003). Neighbor and enemy love exist only when shared and work as the bond to create and strengthen community, while embodying God's relational paradigm for the coming kingdom of heaven (Jones, 1995; Piper, 1979). Loving others as self is the interpersonal aspect of the bi-dimensional nature of theocentric forgiveness (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998).

### ***Despite Being Sinned Against***

The call to forgive is a call to love. The call to love is a call to holiness (cf. Matt 5:44-48; Luke 6:35-36). Forgiveness is the manifestation of costly love at work in the face of sin. To put it simply, to forgive is to love another despite being sinned against. Such forgiving love is a signpost of divine love at work in and through the soul of the one who forgives and is enabled by the Spirit of love Himself. This very point of

loving another despite being sinned against links forgiveness with enemy love.

Movement towards one's offender is not a call to place oneself in harm's way or to act without discernment, but is a call to love in a purposeful and redemptive manner.

***So that the Other Might Love  
God More Deeply***

Every aspect of forgiveness is focused on God and His love. One of the purposes of forgiveness is that both the offended and offender might love God more deeply, which is congruent with life lived out in redemptive history. Therefore, forgiveness is redemptive (cf. Allender, 1999; Enright & Gassin, 1992; Shults & Sandage, 2003; Tracy, 1999). Forgiveness not only sanctifies the forgiver, but can also be used by God to redeem and sanctify the forgiven; accordingly, forgiveness is instrumental in expanding and edifying the body of Christ (cf. Hong, 1984; Jones, 1995).

**Conclusion**

A comprehensive and unified understanding of forgiveness was developed by systematically addressing twelve major issues. God's redemptive history and His two-fold commandment to love simultaneously serve as lighthouses while navigating through the seas of divergent positions found in the literature. Now that forgiveness is defined and a foundational understanding secured, it is time to examine the deeper contours of forgiveness—the dynamics of unforgiveness and the process of forgiveness as a means of sanctification.

## CHAPTER 4

### TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN PSYCHOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS

The work of developing an explicitly theocentric model of forgiveness is almost complete. The foundation for forgiveness is established within the context of redemptive history, structured within the framework of God's two-fold commandment to love, and comprised of God's divine love. The definition of forgiveness, rooted in a theocentric understanding of love, was applied to twelve major aspects of forgiveness to develop a comprehensive and unified paradigm that begins and ends with God and His purposes. Given the theoretical groundwork, this chapter focuses on developing a Christian psychology of forgiveness by examining three major issues in greater detail: the soul dynamics of unforgiveness, the soul dynamics involved in the process of forgiveness, and an essential three-fold dynamic for developing a heart of love.

#### **The Soul Dynamics of Unforgiveness**

##### ***Unforgiveness: The Reality of Suffering and Brokenness***

Life in a fallen world is filled with disappointment, suffering, and heartache. In spite of being saved by grace, a Christian's journey through life involves many difficult and painful trials since the reality of sin, both within and without the soul, hinders the experience of love and joy. Consequently, everyone deals with deep hurts from relational offenses and struggles with the emotion-laden memories that accompany the wrongdoings. Invariably, regardless of age, everyone finds him or herself in the dilemma of unforgiveness, unable to move past the pain, the problem, or the person who caused the heartache. A desire for vengeance and justice often overshadow any

reasons for forgiveness. Over a period of time, the high cost of unforgiveness takes a toll on both body and soul.

### **The Significance of Pain**

Heartache aptly describes the general emotion associated with being wronged by another. Whether the hurt stems from betrayal of a trusted friend or the abuse from a stranger, the resultant pain can deeply sear the heart and disfigure the soul (Storms, 1991). Any model of forgiveness must acknowledge the seriousness of pain stemming from relational transgressions. To not deal with the significance of pain is to deny a reality of life, a reality of the rich and essential aspect of the created soul, and the reality of evil.

The initial experience of deep pain almost always brings about the negative aspects of relational heartache. Deep pain tends to draw one inward, where the focus is predominately on the excruciating hurt and sorrow. Anger emerges from the injustice and violation. Grief sets in, due to a loss of purity, sense of security, or trust. Guilt evolves from self-condemnation from any perceived or actual involvement in the wrongdoing, while shame surfaces from the negative impact that the transgression has on one's identity as a person. As all of these emotions flood the heart and overwhelm the soul, one falls into despair. Consequently, the deep pain presumably hinders deep love—either an awareness of the love from, or the love for, God and others. Deep pain also tries to find relief through rationalization, blame, thoughts of vengeance and justice, or worst case, suicide. Defensive ways of coping with difficulties of life can also be deployed—denial, suppression, repression, disassociation, displacement, and regression (Allender, 1995; Enright, 2001; Young, 1999). The denial of pain results from fear of dealing with the hurt or from the pride behind the refusal to admit the pain, which is a significant impediment to forgiveness (Enright, 2001; Smedes, 1984).

Over time, the positive aspects of pain arise as the offended searches for

meaning in the suffering. Pain forces one to stop and to reflect deeply upon the realities and purposes of life and oneself. God often reveals many truths through the blaring, inner noise of pain (Lewis, 1940) that would not be heard otherwise in the routine of life. God also uses trials and suffering to bring about increasing conformity to Christ (Rom 5:3-5; Jas 1:2-4)—the deeper the pain, the deeper the possibility for character development (Smedes, 1996).

### **The Pain of Memories**

Vivid, terrifying memories can plague those who experienced trauma of any magnitude, frequency, and origin (Jones, 1999). The memories, detailed with every imaginable sense—sight, sound, smell, touch, and even taste—lodge themselves into the depths of the soul, accompanied by unbearable emotions. The memories of a specific wrongdoing that calls for forgiveness are often combined with previous memories of similar offenses from the past (Norris, 1984). Worthington suggests that human beings are “hardwired to remember hurtful events” (2001, p. 112). Despite the brain’s short and long-term memory capabilities, a common way of coping with debilitating memories is to suppress them, to live as if they do not exist; however, this defense activity strategy provides more harm than relief. Facing the painful memories and admitting the reality of the offense and the corresponding heartache are necessary steps for the process of forgiveness (Cunningham, 1985; DiBlasio, 1999; Enright, 2001; Smedes, 1984; White, 1999; Worthington, 2001a).

In spite of the importance of dealing with the hurtful memories, ruminating about the offense and offender more deeply entrenches the emotion-laden memories, causing unforgiveness to deepen its roots in the heart (McCullough, 2001, Root, McCullough, & Bono, 2004). Yet, to a certain degree, “replaying the tape” for the purpose of piecing together the fragments of memory is helpful in establishing a coherent understanding of what took place (Young, 1999). Parenthetically, even if an

accurate account of the event is reconstructed, the offended still struggles to understand “why” the event happened in an attempt to regain control of life and find meaning in the suffering.

### **An Emotional Dilemma**

A torrent of emotions flood a person’s heart, soul, and mind following an interpersonal trauma. The emotional chaos often leads to hopelessness and despair. A slurry of emotions—fear, anger, resentment, guilt, shame, confusion, frustration, and grief—suffocate the wounded soul, keeping it from the life-giving work of love, both intrapsychically and interpersonally.

Fear is a basic instinct that launches the body into a fight or flight mode, which is thought to be related to a state of regression—fear is a primary reactionary emotion for children (Young, 1999). Fear arises with a loss of autonomy, when the ability to control and plan life is threatened or taken away (Young, 1999). Fear cascades into horror when survival is questionable and when the reality of wickedness and its consequences are realized. Erupting from fear is anger that raises its head responsively to defend or attack whatever threatens body or life. Anger, considered to be a core emotion for unforgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Roberts, 2005b), is typically directed towards the offender but can be displaced to others, self, and even God. Resentment is a form of anger that develops as a way of responding to injustice and maltreatment from one who knows better (Hampton, 1988; Roberts, 2005b). The volatility of anger leads to acts of vengeance while bitterness and resentment calculates revenge in a premeditated fashion (Volf, 1996; Worthington, 2001a).

Guilt and shame are moral emotions (Tangney & Dearing, 2002) that are cognitively driven (Young, 1999). Guilt arises most generally from doing a moral wrong and focuses more on particular behaviors or actions, but can also arise as victims blame themselves for doing, or not doing, something that could have avoided the

wrongdoing. Guilt is best dealt with through rational argument (Casey, 1998) and according to research, those who are prone to guilt, more so than shame, are more likely to experience empathy for others and to express forgiveness/seeking of forgiveness (Konstam, Chernoff, & Deveney, 2001; Tagney & Dearing, 2002). Guilt can eat away at the soul if repressed but can be redemptive, if it prods a person toward regret and remorse, ultimately to repentance.

Shame, on the other hand, is focused primarily on the self, on a self-identity associated with worthlessness, failure, and inadequacy (Konstam et al., 2001), even perceiving oneself as responsible for one's own suffering (Young, 1999). Shameful identities are intensified when family and communities at large label victims and view them as deficient, defective, or defiled (Young, 1999). Shame develops, in general, from a lack of loving acceptance (Smedes, 1993) and in particular, from experiencing physical and verbal forms of contempt and abuse (Murphy, 2002; Neu, 2002). Therefore, the most effective way to help those struggling with shame is through accepting, loving relationships which help to untwist distorted self-identities (Casey, 1998; Smedes, 1993). Shame-prone individuals tend to respond opposite of guilt-prone individuals—they are more likely to develop soul disorders and less likely to forgive, to seek forgiveness, and to develop empathy toward others (Konstam et al., 2001; Tagney & Dearing, 2002).

Confusion and frustration plague those who experience deep pain from relational transgressions (Young, 1999). Often, coherent memories are not immediately accessible. Fragments of sensory clues appear randomly and out of sequence, confusing the minds and hearts of the injured. Frustration results not only from the incomplete memory of the event(s), but also from not understanding why they had to suffer from such horrendous acts, and why did nobody care enough to help them or stop the perpetrators. Moreover, frustration results from unrepentant attitudes of offenders or from the lack of justice that ensues. The emotional waves batter victims over and

beyond their initial injuries as they make their way across the sea of growing despair.

The final emotion of grief can be like a silent, yet deadly, powerful undertow that can pull wounded parties down below the surface of reality. Grief, resulting from traumatic loss associated with a crime or relational transgression (Young, 1999), is intense in magnitude and duration. Deep sorrow, brought about by malicious wrongdoing, is intensified by the accompanying fear, anger, and shame that follow an encounter with evil. Overwhelming anguish can also lead to the quagmire of deep depression. The aftershocks in the souls of those who suffer at the hands of another are devastating.

### **Introspection and Outward Evaluation**

Simultaneous to experiencing painful memories and emotions, the wounded soul races with introspection and outward evaluation—specifically looking at self, the offender, and the offense. Part of the pain that the offended suffers results from how the relational injury forces self-examination, challenges self-identity, and questions self-perceptions of the world—how life should be.

The areas included in the self-examination focus not only on aspects surrounding the injury, but also other areas unrelated to the offense and offender. One might evaluate where one is in life, in terms of goals, relationships, lifestyle, and dreams. Again, one might even take on self-blame for some aspect of the particulars surrounding the offense, whether right or wrong. Self-examination regarding the offense usually leads to reflecting on one's identity. Some persistent questions plague the mind and soul: "What kind of person am I if the offender thought he could do this to me and get away with it?" "Did my attitude or actions in some way bring on the offense?" "How do I interpret what she said to me about me? What is true and what should I ignore?" "Why do these sort of things always happen to me—what is wrong with me?" "Nobody has ever loved me and accepted me!" Therefore, part of the

misery in the aftermath of an injury is trying to sort out fact from fiction about self-identity. Finally, traumatic experiences forces one to evaluate life in general. Everyone has a preconceived notion of how life should be and how things should work out, typically shaped by how life has been experienced. Subjective conclusions need to be balanced with the databank of community and of God's Word. The tendency is to think, "No one else has suffered like me!" "I know that God wants me to be happy in life." In fact, the angle between how one expects life to be versus how life really is correlates with the degree of humiliation when one experiences relational hurt (Conver, 1984; Cunningham, 1985). Correspondingly, the larger the magnitude between conscious expectations and unconscious assumptions about self, others, and life, the greater one struggles with unforgiveness.

A natural response to humiliation is to defend oneself, typically through self-righteous judgments directed toward the offender (Cunningham, 1985). The perceived differences between the offended and offender tends to solidify unforgiveness in the heart of the injured party. After the offense, the offended begins the process of noting increasing dissimilarities between himself and the offender (Kierkegaard, 1848/1995), typically by removing the offender from the "community of humans" while removing himself from the "community of sinners" (Volf, 1996, p. 124; cf. Roberts, 2005b). Offenders are often "villainized" by being characterized by their wicked deeds (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998). If there are subsequent interactions between the offended and the offender, then two other differences may be noted by the injured party and lead to additional heartache (Baumeister, 2001). First, there is a magnitude gap in how each party sees the importance of the act. The offended naturally sees the offense as more significant than the offender due to the personal suffering that is experienced. The offender generally has less emotion and derives less meaning from the act itself than the offended. The second difference in magnitude deals with the time perspective. The wounded person takes much more time to process through the injury

in general than it takes for the offender to get over committing the offense. Therefore, the noted differences in perspectives—the significance of the act and the time required to “get over” the incident—contribute to increased depths of unforgiveness.

Volf (1996) introduces the concept of exclusion to explain the dynamics of unforgiveness within the context of God’s created design. He points out that exclusion is contrary to the themes of “binding” and “separating” found throughout the creation account (Plantinga, 1995). Distancing oneself from one’s offender is a violation of God’s relational order as explained by the concepts of binding and separating. Exclusion results when the offended cuts the relational bonds, primarily for self-protective reasons. The magnitude gaps between the offended and the offender provide the self-justification for a break from the wrongdoer. Exclusion also results when the injured party violates the separating principle by viewing the offender as an inferior who must “either be assimilated by being made like the self or be subjugated to the self” (Volf, 1996, p. 67).

Unforgiveness tends to enlarge the magnitude of the offense. The one who denies forgiveness increases the multitude of sins since forgiveness and love cover all sins (Kierkegaard, 1848/1995). When a sin is committed, the natural reaction is to demand justice. The relentless cries for punishment and justice cause the sin to take on a far different appearance than when the sin is covered through forgiveness following the cries for supernatural love and forgiveness. All of the preceding variables—how the offended sees himself, others, and world, along with the perceived differences with the offender—can add to the enormity of the actual offense.

### **Developmental Issues**

Empirical studies report a developmental pattern of forgiveness in children (Enright & Zell, 1989; Park & Enright, 1997, Subkoviak, Enright, Wu, & Gassin, 1995, cited in Baier, 2004). Krause and Ellison (2003) validate the previous efforts of Mullet

and Girard (1997, 2000) who report that adults are more likely to forgive than adolescents and older adults are more likely to forgive than younger adults. From an intrapsychic perspective, poorly developed psychological structures related to selfhood (Augsburger, 1996; Brandsma, 1982; Gartner, 1988; Shults & Sandage, 2003), and developed personality traits that tend to impede forgiveness, are other factors reported to be involved in unforgiveness. The field also emphasizes the intersubjective development of the self, based on how the social and cultural history shapes the formation of the self and the self's ability to be forgiving. Contrary to some in the field, Worthington contends that forgiveness is not the result of cognitive reasoning but of emotional replacement, thus not requiring cognitive and moral development (Enright, 1991, 1994; Enright, Gassin, 1992; Mullet & Girard, 2000). The process of forgiveness dealing with individuals categorized with an Axis II Personality Disorder and mental retardation is not explicitly reported in great measure within the forgiveness literature. There are a plethora of questions that should be addressed in subsequent studies: How might a person's family of origin and life experiences shape one's ability to forgive? How does one's ability to forgive change as one develops and matures with age? Can only those with a fully developed self forgive?

Given the reality of deep woundedness and distorted self-identities, a journey of transformation within a nurturing and loving community is probably required to bring about significant healing in the soul. But at what point of change is a person able to forgive from the heart through the work of God's love in the soul? There is no straight-forward or predictable answer other than the fact that the grace of God moves and works according to His divine timetable (cf. Shults & Sandage, 2003); however, explicitly Christian research, based on the developed theocentric definition and understanding of forgiveness, is necessary to better address these pressing questions.

## **The Desire for Vengeance and Justice**

One of the ways in which human beings reflect God's image is through an innate desire for justice and righteousness, while abhorring unrighteousness and injustice. Therefore, one of the reactions to being wronged is to seek justice and restitution. The dangerous aspect of revenge, however, is that it feels like justice (Carson, 2002); therefore, revenge can be rationalized as acceptable. Moreover, attempts to achieve justice through the court system potentially lead to disappointment or even greater bitterness. For instance, the trial, sentencing, and/or the attitude of the defendant throughout the process may not be commensurate with the horrendous loss experienced by the victim or the family of the victim. Furthermore, no amount of self-directed vengeance or civil-administrated justice can ever right the wrong or bring complete restoration to the soul (Volf, 1996; Worthington, 2003). Ultimately, an overwhelming and obsessive desire for vengeance or retributive justice can further entrench unforgiveness. Paradoxically, forgiveness does not satisfy human or temporal justice, but is able to heal the soul in ways that justice cannot (Augsburger, 1988; cf. Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938; cf. Enright, 2001; Kierkegaard, 1848/1995; cf. Shults & Sandage, 2003; Volf, 1996; White, 1999; Worthington, 2003). Yet, biblical forgiveness does not negate, or do away with justice. Ultimate justice is divine and carried out by the righteous Judge at the end of history.

## **Reasons for Not Forgiving**

The human soul struggles with despair, rage, and rationalization in response to being deeply traumatized. The significant heartache of betrayal, the painful memories of abuse, the turmoil of emotions, and the introspection of self and the judgment of the offender can keep a person in a state of unforgiveness months, or even years after the harrowing experiences. Thoughts of forgiveness are no where to be found. Assuming that a right understanding of forgiveness is known, there are reasonable and unreasonable grounds for not moving towards forgiveness.

Understandably, a person deeply hurt by another fears what the other will do if forgiveness is offered—thoughts that the offense may be repeated or that justice will not prevail (Exline & Baumeister, 2000). A person may also hesitate to forgive due to a previously devastating experience with forgiveness (Cunningham, 1985), an unwillingness to admit the pain caused by the offense (Enright, 2001), or an overwhelming state of shock or brokenness (Patton, 2000). However, there are several unjustifiable reasons not to forgive. The most paradoxical reason is an unwillingness to give up an acquired victim's status that results in the following (Exline & Baumeister, 2000): A loss of leverage to coerce or punish the offender for spiteful purposes, loss of justification "to return evil for evil," loss of "right" to hold onto bitterness, malice, and censorious spirit, and loss of attention and sympathy from friends and family. A final reason to hold onto unforgiveness is a resolve, or willfulness, never to forgive due to a hardened heart (Cunningham, 1985). The reality of unforgiveness that harbors in the suffering and broken soul cannot be ignored. However, friendship with unforgiveness does not come without a cost.

### **The High Cost of Unforgiveness**

The price to anchor in the bay of unforgiveness is dangerously high. From a pragmatic point of view, an unwillingness to forgive another keeps the past alive, while keeping one from living in the present with no hope for change in the future (cf. White, 1999). Past relationships are not resolved, present relationships are hindered, and future relationships are questionable. The continual churning of bitterness, hatred, and self-righteousness takes a tangible toll on the body and soul. The chronic anxiety, anger, and depression that sometimes attend unforgiveness can lead to a number of diseases known to be influenced by stress, to include diseases effecting the vascular and immune systems (Brandsma, 1982; Thorensen, Harris, & Luskin, 2000). Over time, the heart can become hardened with the barnacles of unforgiveness and cultivate pearls of pride,

envy, selfishness, anger, and censoriousness (cf. all antithetical to love described in 1 Cor 13:4-8). The Psalms offer ample descriptions of a soul wracked by affliction and despair (Ps 31:9-13; cf. Pss 32:3-4; 38:17-18; 42:10-11):

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; My eye is wasted away from grief, my soul and my body also. For my life is spent with sorrow And my years with sighing; My strength has failed because of my iniquity, And my body has wasted away. Because of all my adversaries, I have become a reproach, Especially to my neighbors, And an object of dread to my acquaintances; Those who see me in the street flee from me. I am forgotten as a dead man, out of mind; I am like a broken vessel. For I have heard the slander of many, Terror is on every side; While they took counsel together against me, They schemed to take away my life.

Unforgiveness takes a toll not only on the individual encased in its grip, but it also has a detrimental impact on community. An unforgiving spirit is infectious, as its slanderous and judgmental spirit seeps into the hearts of those who are most consistently exposed to the bitter vapors. Contention and division can develop and grow in strength to the point where unity is not seen as possible. The damage caused by unforgiveness is significant.

### *Soul Dynamics: A Biblical Anthropology*

Before looking at the soul dynamics of unforgiveness, it is first necessary to understand the inherent dynamics within the human soul. Since the beginning of redemptive history, the soul has gone from its original design in Creation, to a distortion of the Creator's image after the Fall, to a restoration process after Redemption. Understanding the spiritual realities of the inner person is critical in exploring how unforgiveness impacts a person and is essential in determining how to help a person move from unforgiveness to forgiveness. Fortunately, Scripture provides many insights into the human soul that are useful in developing a Christian psychology of forgiveness.

### **The Created Soul**

Out of divine wisdom, power, and love (Plantinga, 2002), God made human beings in His image and breathed life into them (Gen 1:27; 2:7). God has an intimate

relationship with His image bearers, for He created and fashioned them within their mothers' womb and knows every single day of their lives even before birth (Ps 139:13-16). God has intimate knowledge of His own created representatives, as He searches their hearts and minds, being thoroughly acquainted with all of their ways, even the unspoken words on their tongues (Ps 139:1-4). God is also intimate through proximity, for there is no place where human souls can flee from His presence (Ps 139:7-10).

God intentionally and purposefully makes human beings according to His good pleasure, plans, and ultimately, for His glory (Isa 43:7; 1 Cor 10:31). Souls are created for eternity, with eternity placed in their hearts (Eccl 3:11). Each soul, brought alive by the breath of God, is made to relate intimately, identify with, and imitate his/her Creator. However, God knew that it was not good for man to be alone, so He formed woman out of man and brought them together in a covenantal relationship with Himself (Gen 2:18, 21-22). Therefore, God's creatively designed men and women to be primarily in relationship with Him, then secondarily with one another, thus forming the basis of the two-fold commandment of love.

What is the significance of being created in the image of God? First, because the soul is made in the image of God, the inherent attributes of the soul are good. The ontological aspect of being image bearers—relational, cognitive, volitional, and expressive capacities—are all reflective of God Himself. There is also a developmental aspect of image bearing—all souls are to grow in Christ-likeness. The more development that takes place, by the grace of God, the more glory God receives (Johnson, 2002). Second, the eternal soul, created in the image of God, has an inherent nature to know truth, to desire life, and to love love (Burnaby, 1938; Edwards, 1852/2000). Each of these natures has its ultimate fulfillment in God. Knowledge, life, and love resulting in greater righteousness lead to “a fuller participation in the life of God,” who is Truth, Life, and Love (Burnaby, 1938, p. 149). In His high priestly prayer, Jesus includes all three aspects as He expresses that “eternal life” is “knowing”

God and Him who was sent by the Father (John 17:3), and the Father's "love" for the Son also abides in His children because they know the Father (John 17:26).

A final aspect of the created soul deals with its expansiveness and nobility. The created soul is made with a "primitive greatness and expandedness" (Edwards, 1852/2000, p. 157) that comprehends the welfare of fellow creatures, with generosity being the norm. The soul is designed to be governed by the divine love of God; consequently, there is to be a consistent, dynamic flow of "holy love" between God and the human soul to the point where the two are drawn together in unity and intimacy (Edwards, 1852/2000). With such love, the nearness of God is the soul's good and satisfaction (Pss 73:28; 16:11).

### **The Fallen Soul**

Upon listening to another voice in the garden, Adam and Eve wandered off the path of righteousness. They listened to another counselor (Tripp, 2002), who disguised falsity as the truth, death as life, and wickedness as love. Immediately after rejecting the truth, life, and love of God, the created soul's original design became defiled, distorted, and divided from its intimate relationship and identity with God. Edwards (1852/2000) provides a riveting description of how the created soul changed towards unrighteousness—away from the life of God:

Sin, like some powerful astringent, contracted his soul to the very small dimensions of selfishness; and God was forsaken, and fellow-creatures forsaken, and man retired within himself, and became totally governed by narrow and selfish principles and feelings. Self-love became absolute master of his soul, and the more noble and spiritual principles of his being took wings and flew away. (p. 158)

The created self-love, no longer connected to or governed by the sovereign love of God (Edwards, 1852/2000), is navigated by the sin within the soul, as it lives in a fallen world ruled by the principalities of evil. The parasitic nature of sin (Plantinga, 1995) infests the ontological (noetic depravity) and developmental (bio-psychosocial damage) aspects of the image bearers. Neighbor is cut off from the contracted soul that

is driven more by selfishness than generosity. The soul's good (God) is no longer near; consequently, the soul, which is designed to know, live for, and love God, now hungers and thirsts for anything and everything that brings immediate and temporal pleasure. Therefore, the fallen soul is restless, discontent, and never satisfied.

The fallen soul finds itself in despair since it fails to be a genuine self that is wholly dependent upon and transparent before God (Kierkegaard, 1849/1989). Kierkegaard describes two types of despair: the despair of defiance and the despair of weakness. The defiant self thinks itself as God, infinite and eternal, while refusing to be the self God intends by misusing the freedom to choose to be some other self. The weak self sees only the finite and temporal, failing to be the self God intends by passively living without seeing the possibilities available through the grace of God. The soul also finds itself in despair as the result of grappling with the pain, brokenness, shame, and guilt of being sinned against, along with the consequences associated with the offense. The fallen soul can find itself in despair due to a lack of hope beyond itself, damaged due to experiencing great pain and suffering, and detached due to fear of further hurt and loss.

A significant characteristic of the fallen soul is its desperately wicked heart (Jer 17:9; Matt 15:19; Mark 7:21), which is a central truth in dealing with the tendency of unforgiveness (cf. Tripp, 2002; Volf, 1996). Moreover, the contractedness of the fallen soul keeps it from absorbing the pain of sin, which is antithetical to meekness, thus making it more difficult to deal with the realities of being sinned against. Finally, because of its disconnect from God, the infinite source of divine love, the fallen soul is not disposed to love God or others, thereby, living as a violator of God's law of love.

### **The Redeemed Soul**

Through the salvific work of Jesus Christ on the cross, God redeemed His people for His own possession (Titus 2:14). The human soul, which was once dead in

sin, is now revived by the indwelling Spirit of Christ. The redeemed soul actually lives not on its own, but through the life of Christ (Rom 8:11; Gal 2:20; Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938). The spirit not only comes alive, but expands as the bonds of sin that confined and constricted the soul are broken by the power of divine love (Edwards, 1852/2000). When the eternality of divine love invades and takes residence in the heart (cf. Eccl 3:11; Rom 5:5; Kierkegaard, 1847/1995), the redeemed soul receives eternal eyes of faith and once again enjoys participation in God's divine nature through union with Christ (Edwards, 1852/2000). Moreover, the soul's beauty now surpasses its original beauty because of the beauty of Christ—"the beauty of the Bride of Christ is the Bridegrooms' gift" (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938, p. 158). The soul finds rest and refuge in God once more.

Scripture teaches that a redeemed person possesses a new self (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10), centered upon Christ (Volf, 1996), versus the old fallen self (Eph 4:22; Col 3:9). The old self is crucified with Christ (Rom 6:6) so that the body and soul are no longer in bondage to sin. Volf contends that the Spirit of Christ, upon entering "the citadel of the self, de-centered the self by fashioning it in the image of the self-giving Christ" (1996, p. 72). He adds that the very structures of the self are integrated with Christ, thereby, beginning the transformation of the self's identity likened with Christ. The new self, centered upon Christ, is characterized by love, forgiveness, and other "noble and divine principles" (Edwards, 1852/2000), and is constrained, or governed, by the love of God (2 Cor 5:14-15), so that it no longer lives for itself, but for Christ who died for its redemption. The redeemed self, expanded and satisfied by divine love, regains its comprehension of others and opens itself up, not only to include others, but to give itself for others as it strives to imitate Christ (cf. Edwards, 1852/2000; Volf, 1996). Additionally, the self-love associated with the redeemed soul finds renewed and ultimate satisfaction through loving God and others with the divine love that flows through its veins. The redeemed soul finds pleasure in keeping God's law of love.

## The Battlefield of the Soul

Despite the successful invasion of divine love upon the beaches of the redeemed soul and the certain capture of the command post of the heart, a battle still rages between flesh and spirit. Ultimate victory has already been won at the cross of Christ (2 Cor 2:14; 1 Cor 15:55-57), but opposition still remains, evident by mortar blasts of evil thoughts, screaming sirens of sinful desires, and many other bullet traces of corruption that disrupt the love of Christ within the human heart (Edwards, 1852/2000). Redeemed souls should be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, be strong, and do everything in love (1 Cor 16:13-14), for the warfare is ruthless and unceasing during the journey of redemption. Even though they no longer rule the soul, remnants of the old self are entrenched in fortified positions, seeking every opportunity to overthrow the divine rulership of the heart. Edwards (1852/2000) provides a vivid portrait of the battle that rages against the supreme grace of God:

Sometimes grace, in the midst of the most violent opposition of its enemies fighting against it with their united subtlety and strength, is like a spark of fire encompassed with swelling billows and raging waves that appear as if they would swallow it up and extinguish it in a moment. . . . The powers of earth and hell are engaged against it, if possible to destroy it; and oftentimes they rise with such violence, and come with such great strength against it, that if we were to judge only by what appears, we should think it would be taken and destroyed immediately. (pp. 288-289)

Fortunately, the divine attributes of love are greater than the evil forces of Satan in the world (1 John 4:4). The true grace of God will prevail, as it faithfully perseveres in the mortification of sin, stays connected to the sovereign King through prayer, and adheres to the promises of God (Ps 37:24; Matt 18:14; John 6:39; 10:27-30; Phil 1:6; 1 Cor 1:8; cf. Edwards, 1852/2000). Nothing will be able to separate the redeemed soul from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, who rules the heart (Rom 8:35-39).

The divine love of God that enlivens the soul not only creates a new creature (2 Cor 5:17), but also creates a new disposition of the heart. Such eternal love disposes the heart to love righteousness and hate unrighteousness. The characteristics of love

begin to conform the soul to that of Christ—long-suffering, kindness, not envious or prideful, not acting unbecomingly, not selfish, not provoked, and not keeping into account a wrong suffered (1 Cor 13:4-5). Divine love also mobilizes the natural affections towards God and others (Edwards, 1852/2000) so that the soul advances in strength and resolve in the battle between flesh and Spirit. In spite of the intense and dangerous battle that can wreak havoc in the soul, all confidence can be placed on the fact that the supreme grace of divine love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails . . .” (1 Cor 13:7-8).

### *Unforgiveness and the Redeemed Soul*

The battle of unforgiveness is relentless. The bombs of resentment and bitterness explode everywhere, especially within the deep bunkers of the heart and mind. This battle is fought with one’s entire being since it is perceived that one’s entire life depends upon it. This battle is fought with every ounce of strength that is left because deep wounds have been inflicted by the shrapnel of injustice, abuse, and/or betrayal. It is common to fight this battle without a proper strategy, without adequate protection, and without the proper reinforcements. Reinforcements, if used improperly, might cause the spirit of unforgiveness to rage with even greater intensity, raising the stakes and the opposition to overwhelming odds. The battle is real, and it belongs to the offended one, or does it?

### **A Natural Response to Sin**

“Evil engenders evil, and like pyroclastic debris from the mouth of a volcano, it erupts out of aggressor and victim alike” (Volf, 1996, p. 87). Unforgiveness is the soul’s response to being sinned against. The wickedness from the offense stirs up the vestiges of corruption in the heart of the offended. Kierkegaard (1847/1995) offers a graphic description of the dynamics of sin:

When the sin in a person is surrounded by sin, it is in its element. Nourished by the

incessancy of occasion, it thrives and grows (that is, if one can speak of thriving in connection with evil). It becomes more and more malignant; it gains a more and more definite shape (that is, if one can speak of gaining more definite shape in connection with evil, since evil is a lie and deception and thus without shape); it attaches itself more and more, even if its life is suspended over the abyss and has no foothold. (p. 298)

So it is with unforgiveness. The sin within the offended rejoices with unrighteousness and mobilizes the soul to fight evil with evil. However, the deceitfulness of sin actually gains a foothold, as unforgiveness begins to bear fruit—bitterness, hatred, anger, fear, malice, and self-righteousness. Unforgiveness actually keeps the sin of the offense exposed, thus ensuring that the sin is constantly nourished from the surrounding sin within and without. On the other hand, forgiveness and love cover all transgressions, thus depriving the sin of life (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995). Love is the most powerful weapon against sin and serves to isolate the parasite from its element, thus breaking sin's powerful grip on the wounded soul.

### **A Violation of the Law of Love**

As the pain of the offense and its consequences bury themselves in the fertile soil of memory, seeds of discontent sprout and thrust their roots deep into the injured heart. A growing disdain fertilizes the disparity between those involved, as the offended removes herself from the community of sinners and removes the offender from the community of humans (Volf, 1996). The sin of unforgiveness develops derivative layers of unrighteousness onto the wound to the point that the pain from the unforgiveness becomes greater than the pain of the original offense (cf. Augustine, 1997). The resultant hatred stirs up strife and has no desire to cover the sin (cf. Prov 10:12; 17:9); consequently, divine love is constrained by the constricted soul, with less opportunity to function in its creative and conforming capacity. From this perspective, unforgiveness is seen as a failure to love, as a violation of God's law of love. The unforgiveness moves the offended further and further away from fulfilling the royal law (Jas 2:8-9) and casts a blinding spotlight on the one who hates his brother. The one who

loves his brother with neighbor love, or even enemy love, is said to be a child of God, who abides in the light and has eternal life abiding in himself, whereas the one who hates his brother abides and walks in the darkness like a child of the devil, and is even called a murderer (1 John 2:10-11; 3:10-11; 3:14-16). The New Testament passages are passionate about God's law of love and offer no alternatives.

A right understanding of unforgiveness is critical in the struggles within the soul. An erroneous definition of unforgiveness has serious implications, especially in the battle for love. A definition of unforgiveness, structured in line with the theocentric definitions of love and forgiveness, is offered:

*Unforgiveness is a work of the flesh that keeps one from giving oneself in divine love for the other because of being sinned against, thus resulting in apathy, or disdain, for the other's relationship with God.*

Contrary to forgiveness, unforgiveness is not a work of God's love, but is a fruit of the flesh's hatred and commingling with sin. Unforgiveness does not compel the offended to move towards, but away from the offender in an exclusionary manner. It is exactly because of being sinned against that unforgiveness does not participate in the redemptive and sanctifying work of divine love in either the offended or the offender. Finally, unforgiveness is more interested in vengeance or avoidance, than in the spiritual welfare of the offender. Loving the offender, who is a neighbor, as oneself is of no interest. Loving the offender like Christ—laying down one's life for another—is inconceivable. Loving one's enemy is impossible. Therefore, unforgiveness violates the law of love.

### **Unforgiveness and Intimacy**

Unforgiveness tends to focus on the offense and the offender, but is the human relationship the only relationship that is impacted by an unwillingness to forgive? From a theocentric perspective, unforgiveness is really between the offended and God (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995) since it significantly impacts one's relationship with

God, conflicts with divine love, and ultimately, can be considered spiritual adultery.

### *Intimacy with God*

A person deeply hurt from the hands of another struggles with great emotional pain and brokenness. If the trauma occurs consistently over a long period of time, the roots of despair and unforgiveness run deep, and can strangle the development of identity and relational abilities. How does unforgiveness impact one's intimacy with God? In addressing the sinful, not the developmental, response to relational trauma, the intense, glaring heat of bitterness dries out the good soil of the heart, making it hard to love God and others. The poisonous slime of hatred seeps into and defiles the deep furrows of the soul, arousing other unrighteous remnants to be resurrected with a fury against righteousness. The inward pull of introspection keeps the eyes from looking heavenward, and the affections are re-directed toward the offender and associated negative thoughts of the wrongdoing, as well as other hurtful life experiences. Truth no longer brings solace to the soul, but condemnation and slander of the offender bring the soul greater delight. The soul hungers and thirsts for vengeance and justice and consequently finds itself unsatisfied, always craving more of what it cannot get. The dynamics of unforgiveness deplete the desire within the soul for anything pure, lovely, or worthy of worship. Over time, the soul shrinks, no longer filled and stretched by the continuous flow of eternal love, making it more sensitive to real and perceived sins.

The spiritual dynamics of a soul turned away from God is one of chaos:

As the soul can have life which is life indeed only by participation in the life of God, so it can have vision only when it is "turned towards" the Truth. "The beginning of the punishment which God inflicts upon the soul that turns away from Him is blindness itself. For he who turns away from the true Light which is God, is thereby made blind. He does not feel his punishment, but already he has it." And so it is with the soul's love. The "disordered soul" is "its own punishment." (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938, p. 207)

Therefore, the disarray within the disordered soul resulting from unforgiveness negatively impacts one's intimacy with God. Moreover, any sinful

disobedience to forgive “is a fresh decision against God” (Berkhof, 1938, p. 249) and serves as a hindrance to loving God with all of one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength.

### *Contrary Loves*

The love of God dwells in the redeemed soul. However, when the heart is filled with the winds of bitterness, wrath, malice, and hatred, the heart is disposed to fly in a direction opposite of the winds created and sustained by divine love. With the mixing of contrary air masses, turbulence tosses the soul relentlessly as one proceeds on the course of unforgiveness, rather than on the course of love and forgiveness. Similar to how pilots are trained to trust their instruments, the thoughts and emotions associated with unforgiveness convince the soul that the present flight path is correct; however, the soul needs to trust the radically different flight path indicated by the faithful instruments of God’s law of love. Augustine describes the moral struggles within the soul as a battle of the “heavenly delectation,” which rejoices in righteousness and leads to life, versus the “earthly delectation,” which delights in unrighteousness and leads to death (cited in Burnaby, 1938, p. 223). The two delectations are “rival loves,” the former from the city of God and the latter from city of man (Burnaby, 1938, p. 224). Unforgiveness is driven by fleshly affections, whereas forgiveness is driven by the affections of divine love. Ultimately, the stronger of the two affections determines whether one forgives or not—unforgiveness demands the ways of the flesh, forgiveness demands transcendence. As an important point of clarification, the redeemed soul never achieves perfection of either of the rival loves, but remains a mixture of the contrasting affections. Augustine understands that the weakness and defilement of love in the human soul, due to the contrary affections, keep it from experiencing lasting intimacy with God:

Augustine remained convinced that what condemns all intuitive experience to transiency, what prevents us from 'standing fast in the fruition of God', is no mere necessity of our temporal existence but the infirmity and impurity of our love.” (Burnaby, 1938, p. 36)

### ***Spiritual Adultery***

The utmost care and understanding must be given to those who have been deeply hurt. Loving counsel should encourage them to lean into Christ with their weary and heavy souls to find unrelenting rest, incomparable comfort, and everlasting hope. Given that every traumatic experience and every individual is different, there is no set time table or rigid sequence of events that those struggling with unforgiveness should adhere to. However, there might be a time in which individuals enslaved to unforgiveness find greater pleasure and satisfaction in the haughtiness of self-righteousness, the familiarity of despair, and the euphoria of vengeful thoughts than in God. It is in such cases when unforgiveness turns into spiritual adultery. Spiritual adultery is most immediately equated to lustful desires and thoughts that flow from the heart after another person (Matt 5:27-28). However, throughout the Old Testament, God describes Israel's idolatrous affections, unfaithfulness, and rebellion against Him as adultery (Jer 5:7; 7:9; Ezek 16:38; Hos 2:2). In the Gospels, Jesus accuses the Jewish people of being an evil and adulterous generation for seeking a miraculous sign instead of believing in Him (Matt 12:39; 16:4; Mark 8:38). Therefore, spiritual adultery can be understood as thoughts and desires that defile the heart before God, and includes a heart of unbelief. In other words, spiritual adultery is committed when desires or thoughts dispose the heart to what is contrary to the dispositions of divine love and the heart of God—in this sense, unforgiveness can be understood as spiritual adultery.

The significance and seriousness of unforgiveness is highlighted by the fact that unforgiveness impacts intimacy with God, results in contrary loves, and leads to spiritual adultery. But that is not all. Unforgiveness also impacts one's identity.

### **Unforgiveness and Self-Identity**

Research shows that shame-prone individuals are less likely to forgive, to seek forgiveness, and to develop empathy toward others (Konstam et al., 2001; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). In other words, those struggling with shame also struggle with

unforgiveness. Given the clinical findings, there is one other question that begs to be answered—if self-identity impacts unforgiveness, how might unforgiveness impact self-identity? To answer this exploratory question, the relationality of identity is addressed, along with the relational impediments that normally accompany unforgiveness.

### ***Identity's Relationality***

The self is formed through relationships and can only be a self through relationships (Augsburger, 1996; Kierkegaard, 1849/1989; Volf, 1996). In referencing Plantinga's (1995) creational principles of separating and binding, Volf (1996) concludes that "the human self is formed not through a simple rejection of the other—through a binary logic of opposition and negation—but through a complex process of 'taking in' and 'keeping out'" (p. 66). The self is developed through a life experience of interacting, giving of oneself, and receiving words, emotions, and actions from others through relationships—formal and informal, short and long, good and bad, loving and unloving. Simply relating to other people is not sufficient for self-development. Going back to the created design, the only way a person can have a true self is to relate transparently and dependently upon God (Kierkegaard, 1849/1989). Therefore, the self must relate to God and others in order to develop per God's design. Subsequently, God's two-fold commandment to love seems to be an essential template for the development of the self; therefore, identity must be explored with regards to God's law of love, given that love for God and others is an essential element of God's relational paradigm.

### ***Relational Impediments***

The sin of unforgiveness not only keeps one from loving the offender, but also hinders relationships with others to some degree. The stagnant pool of bitterness, malice, and anger in the heart from unforgiveness taint other relationships, as love flows from the same fountain as hatred—from the heart (Jas 3:8-12). But how might

unforgiveness shape self-identity, or how might failing to love others in general and an offender in particular impact the soul's identity? The first step in addressing these questions is to review how divine love shapes the heart and soul. The eternity of divine love enlivens the soul with the Spirit of Christ and returns the heart to a rhythm that resonates with its Creator and Redeemer. The indwelling, efficacious Spirit of love disposes the heart to love God and others. Divine love calls forth the original expansiveness and generosity of the soul which comprehends and strives to meet the needs of others. The redeemed self begins to experience new realms that transcend the accustomed two-dimensional, temporal reality. The eyes of faith enable the self to see and relate to God in the broader reality of eternity. In union with Christ, the self's identity begins a lifelong transformation of increasing Christ-likeness—in mind (1 Cor 2:16) and attitude (Phil 2:5).

Failure to love not only slows the transformation of the self's identity, but also causes the soul to contract and reflect the image of unrighteous humanity rather than the image of the righteous God. From the perspective of the positive work of divine love, unforgiveness slows the progress of sanctifying change and calls forth the unrighteous attributes of the old self. But there are other ways in which the soul's identity is negatively impacted by unforgiveness. Unforgiveness can cause the self to withdraw in self-protection, accompanied by the self-absorption of bitterness and introspection. Remnants of anger catapult the self outward, in ways that are offensive and unloving. Steeped in unforgiveness, the eyes of the self loses the true vision of God and His ways, thus becoming self-deceived by misperceptions of self and the offender—resulting in self-righteousness. Therefore, the self's identity can become characterized more by fear and distrust through self-protection, more angry and hopeless through self-absorption, more prideful and judgmental through the self-deception and self-righteousness. Overall, the self's perception of itself diverges from its true identity, driven more by hate than love, centered more on self than on Christ.

Most regrettably, with the resultant self-exaltation and self-centeredness, unforgiveness causes the reality of one's true self in Christ to be obscured, which directly impacts the self's desire to love and forgive like Christ.

### **Unforgiveness and Imitation**

Unforgiveness serves as a filter and regulator for living life. Situations and relationships are processed through the constricted passageways of the unforgiving, unloving soul. The contracted soul may "hear" the Word but is not motivated to "do" the Word due to a sense of disconnect from God. The exhortations to deny self, take up the cross, and follow Jesus are received more with a sense of duty than delight since there is not a close identity with Christ, and one's energy is depleted through the low grade fever of bitterness and hatred. To fellowship in the sufferings of Christ sounds masochistic based on the real and perceived suffering already encountered. To give oneself in love is unimaginable because the self is depleted and parched, in much need of renewal and restoration found only in the springs of living waters (John 4:13-14). Given the lack of intimacy and identity with God, submitting to the will of God seems beyond reach. Left to one's own strength and resources, forgiveness is not possible. Unforgiveness seems to be the only thing left that gives a sense of life. Sandage (2003) puts flesh on the concept that unforgiveness is the last remaining sustenance of life:

One abuse survivor who fervently resisted forgiving others, even people he cared about, explained to me, "Hate is all I've got!" What he meant was that he had learned early in life that hate was his only defense against the massive psychological pain of being physically abused by those he trusted most in life—his parents. Hate helped him form a self-protective armor and fueled his determination to survive his family battleground. In relying on such hate he could not afford to empathize or take the perspective of others, which is quite understandable given his early life context. (p. 59)

### **The Bottom Line of Unforgiveness**

Unforgiveness, understood as a work of the flesh that keeps one from giving oneself in divine love for the other because of being sinned against, thus resulting in

apathy, or disdain, for the other's relationship with God, is sin—a failure to love. To discuss and treat unforgiveness primarily as negative emotions and thoughts run the risk of overshadowing the spiritual implications; however, to deal disingenuously with unforgiveness for the sake of legalistic obedience, without taking seriously struggles of the soul, is dangerous as well. The dynamics of unforgiveness should not be dismissed but used to explore what is going on in the soul (Smedes, 1984; Worthington, 2001a, 203). For example, bitterness can serve as a beacon of light that exposes darkness associated with one's affections, identity, or even purposes in life. The obsessive rumination of injustice might be a flare that is able to pierce the blind spot of self-centeredness or pride. God can redeem anything meant for evil and use it for good (Gen 50:20). It would be remiss not to highlight the explicit and implicit scriptural warnings associated with unforgiveness and the fact that unforgiveness is contrary to the essence of Christianity.

### *Scriptural Warnings*

Immediately after the Lord's Prayer, Jesus adds, "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matt 6:14-15). In a separate passage, Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive a brother. Jesus responds by telling Peter that he should forgive "up to seventy times seven" (Matt 18:21-22). Jesus proceeds to give further instruction on forgiveness with a parable about a king who wishes to settle accounts with his slaves. The first slave is mercifully forgiven by the king of an insurmountable debt. In response, the slave goes to a fellow slave and demands repayment of a small debt—the fellow slave is not able to pay off his debt immediately, so the first slave unmercifully throws the other in prison. When the king hears of what the forgiven slave had done to his fellow slave, the king angrily withdraws his forgiveness and demands repayment of everything owed. Jesus

concludes the parable by warning, “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart” (Matt 18:35).

These two explicit warnings against unforgiveness are powerfully stated and cannot be dismissed. These passages do not teach that God withdraws His saving grace of redemption from His children; however, there are several key points that are implied. First, these warning passages imply that unforgiveness is contrary to the essence of the Gospel message of redemption, a message that highlights the gracious love and forgiveness of God. Second, God expects His children to imitate Him—be merciful (Luke 6:36) and be perfect (Matt 5:48) as the heavenly Father is merciful and perfect. Third, nestled in Scripture are integrated themes—what one does/ does not do unto others, one does/does not do unto God (Matt 25:31-45), and what one does/does not do unto others, God does/does not do unto the one (Ps 18:25-26; Matt 7:1-2). Kierkegaard calls this relationship between oneself, God, and others the “Christian like for like” (1847/1995, p. 376). He explains that the Jewish like for like—the *lex talionis*, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21)—is abolished by Christianity, but is replaced by eternity’s like for like, where everything is turned inward, away from the external, and makes every relationship a matter between God and self:

In the Christian sense, a person ultimately and essentially has only God to deal with in everything, although he still must remain in the world and in the earthly circumstances assigned to him. But having only God to deal with in everything (thus one is never delayed along the way, midway, by the lower court, by human judgment, as if that were decisive) is simultaneously the highest comfort and the greatest strenuousness, the greatest leniency and rigorousness. . . . How rigorous this Christian like for like is! The Jewish, the worldly, the bustling like for like is: as others do unto you, by all means take care that you also do likewise unto them. But the Christian like for like is: God will do unto you exactly as you do unto others. In the Christian sense, you have nothing at all to do with what others do unto you---it does not concern you . . . You have to do only with what you do unto others, or how you take what others do unto you. The direction is inward; essentially you have to do only with yourself before God. . . . In the Christian sense, to love people is to love God, and to love God is to love people—what you do unto people, you do unto God, and therefore what you do unto people, God does unto you. (pp. 376-377; 383; 384)

In other words, in God's eternal relational paradigm, one is called to answer for every personal action, regardless of the actions of others. Furthermore, anything done to others is done to God, and God returns the action or attitude in like manner. The Gospel saves by grace, but the law of the Gospel is rigorously enforced (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995).

### ***Contrary to Christianity***

The pollutant of unforgiveness spoils the pure river of divine love that flows through the redeemed soul. Like an oil spill that oozes from a wrecked tanker, unforgiveness and all of its impurities are distinct entities from the larger body of water. The chemical makeup of unforgiveness is foreign to the essence of love and disposes the heart to contrary affections and actions. Edwards (1852/2000) speaks forthrightly about the contrariness of unforgiveness to Christianity:

... what a watch and guard should Christians keep against envy, and malice, and every kind of bitterness of spirit towards their neighbours! For these things are the very reverse of the real essence of Christianity. A Christian should at all times keep a strong guard against everything that tends to overthrow or corrupt or undermine a spirit of love. An envious Christian, a malicious Christian, a cold and hard-hearted Christian, is the greatest absurdity and contradiction. (p. 23)

### **The Soul Dynamics of Forgiveness**

After acknowledging the reality of brokenness, pain, and injustice, the focus shifts to the core issues involved in moving towards forgiveness. There are some global questions that provide guidance to forgiveness. How can the person understand her traumatic story in light of God's redemptive history; specifically, how does God use suffering in the journey of redemption? How can the journey between the past and future be used as a pathway to forgiveness? What soul dynamics are associated with forgiveness? How can a person become aware of hardness of heart? How does one fan the flames of eternal love so that the love of God can once again burn in a powerful and transforming way? How can increasing intimacy with God and a growing identity in

Christ help one forgive like Christ? Questions like these facilitate the understanding of the journey of forgiveness.

### *A Theology of Suffering*

Any viable model of forgiveness takes seriously the pain and suffering associated with interpersonal transgressions. Working through the grief process—to identify, accept, and deal with hurtful emotions and thoughts—is critical to healing (Holmgren, 2002). However, is emotional relief and psychological well-being the primary goals of working through the pain and grief associated with suffering? The Scriptures provide an understanding of suffering that takes advantage of several unique aspects of living life in Christ. As with any theocentric approach, God and His purposeful, redemptive plans are central. A theocentric worldview takes seriously the temporal and eternal aspects of reality, but the present realities of the spiritual realm and the future realities of eternity are suppose to play more significant roles than the temporal sufferings. The reality of pain and the outworking of evil are always acknowledged, but the sufferer's intimacy with God and identity with Christ, along with God's powerful grace, take center stage. Finally, the examples of suffering found all throughout Scripture are meant to serve as illustrations of how God cares for and comforts His people in trials and tribulations. The biblical examples of suffering focus not only on God's sovereign work, but also zeroes in on the soul dynamics of His people: crying out and seeking God for refuge in the midst of their anguish and despair; finding solace, strength, and hope as they remember and trust in His faithfulness and lovingkindness; and responding with praise, thanksgiving, and worship of their God. God's ultimate portrait of suffering—the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross—provides an invaluable paradigm for developing a theological understanding of the purpose and meaning of suffering, especially in how suffering relates to forgiveness.

## Transcending Temporal Sufferings

Suffering occurs in the here and now; however, because divine love abides in the redeemed heart, the suffering soul is also connected to eternity. In other words, the temporal reality of suffering takes on extremely different dimensions when the reality of eternity and the Spirit of God are factored into the equation. Perhaps the most radical aspect in looking at suffering from a theocentric perspective is the distinction that can be made between the body and soul. Despite the brutality and abuse endured by the physical body, the soul can be unwavering in Christ. This is not to say that the soul is not affected—the human soul suffers greatly when sinned against, as seen throughout the Psalms and in the agony of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. Nevertheless, the eyes of faith and a heart filled with hope in God enable the soul to transcend the temporal reality of suffering to the point where the torment of the flesh does not disfigure the mind and soul in like manner. How is it possible for the body and soul to realize such differential experiences? Paul provides insight into this critical question as he writes to the Corinthians about his sufferings for the sake of Christ:

*we are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. . . . Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Cor 4:8-10, 16-18)

Paul writes from personal experience, having been stoned, beaten with rods, flogged, shipwrecked, imprisoned, having spent many sleepless nights hungry, thirsty, and exposed to the elements (2 Cor 11:23-27). Despite oppressive suffering—“afflicted,” “perplexed,” “persecuted,” and “struck down”—Paul’s heart expands with joy from the “liberating love of Christ” (Hughes, 1962, p. 138; cf. 2 Cor 7:5ff.). The “dying” and the “life of Jesus” manifested in the body not only refers to the example set by Christ, but Paul dies daily as he takes up his cross to follow Jesus (1 Cor 15:31).

Paul also lives each moment in faith, knowing that it is no longer he who lives, but Christ who lives in him (cf. Gal 2:20). In spite of horrendous beatings, Paul knows that even if his body is killed, his soul, which is hidden with Christ (Col 3:3), is indestructible (cf. 2 Cor 5:1). Ultimately, Paul knows that every believer follows the life, death, resurrection path blazed by Christ, resulting in the glorification of both body and soul (2 Cor 5:1ff.; 1 Cor 15:42ff.; Hughes, 1962). Paul transcends his suffering for the sake of Christ by experiencing it in view of eternity—affliction is seen in terms of glory, the temporal sufferings are seen as momentary compared to the infinite moments of eternity, and the pain is seen as light compared to the weightiness of God’s eternal glory that awaits him in heaven. Ultimately, it is impossible for any human soul to transcend unspeakable suffering without the indwelling grace of God, whose “power is perfected in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

### **Crisis of Faith**

A soul that finds joy and thanksgiving in the aftermath of suffering is supernatural. Awareness of the present and future realities of God and His faithful lovingkindness plays a crucial role in dealing with pain. However, intense suffering can easily blind the eyes of faith. Consequently, another radical notion in a theocentric view of suffering is to understand that the suffering is not the trial as much as the crisis of faith. Over the long run, suffering can either strengthen one’s faith or cause one to doubt God and His goodness. Especially with the ever-present realities of prolonged suffering, the presence of the invisible God can seem distant or non-existent. A despairing soul longs for answers, reassurance, and hope to get through the seemingly endless nightmare of suffering. The soul struggles to believe that God is loving and faithful and has ordained the suffering not as the end, but as a means to greater Christ-likeness. Volf (1996) comments on this crucial moment of decision:

In the final analysis, the only available options are either to reject the cross and with it the core of the Christian faith or to take up one's cross, follow the

Crucified—and be scandalized ever anew by the challenge. (p. 26)

The challenge set before the follower of Christ is scandalous—it is radically different not only from the world’s perspective, but also from the natural inclinations of the soul. The call to holiness through suffering is difficult. The call to love in the face of sin and its consequences is hard. But God, in His infinite wisdom, power, and love, not only preserves the soul, but causes it to flourish through the creative and conforming work of His Spirit of love. God can use pain as a pathway to profound intimacy with Christ.

### **Forgiveness as Suffering**

Working through suffering is an important part of working towards forgiveness from the heart. However, forgiveness involves two forms of suffering—the “passive suffering of victimization” and the “active suffering” involved in moving redemptively towards the offender in divine love (Volf, 1996, p. 125). In other words, forgiveness requires giving oneself for the spiritual welfare of the other, in spite of personal pain and inclinations. To state it simply, forgiveness requires suffering for the sake of Christ. Isaiah 53 provides a striking portrait of the sufferings of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus Christ humbled Himself as He took on the form of a man with “no stately form or majesty” (v. 2). He was “despised and forsaken of men” (v. 3). He bore “the sickness and the pain” of His people as He was “pierced through . . . crushed . . . chastened . . . and scourged” (vv. 4-5) to “justify the many . . . as He bore the sins of many and interceded for the transgressors” (vv. 11-12). The Lord suffered beyond measure as He gave His life for the sake of His enemies. In the glorious shadow of the cross, human forgiveness can be considered as suffering (Volf, 1996), suffering as a means of growing intimacy with and imitation of Christ (cf. Phil 3:7-10).

### *Forgiveness: The Journey between the Past and Future*

The road to healing from interpersonal trauma is difficult. If overcoming the painful memories is not daunting enough, the idea of moving across the mountain of unforgiveness to get to the valley of forgiveness seems undesirable and even impossible. The human soul is created with inclinations to avoid pain and to fight against injustice; however, it can slip easily into the deep ruts of sinful tendencies, often getting stuck, unable to make progress for weeks, months, or years. This section does not address how to work with hurtful memories—this important issue demands a separate work. Instead, the aim of this section is to explore the eternal realities, roadways, and resources that are readily available to every redeemed soul in traveling the course towards forgiveness. The following questions are real for every person faced with the challenge to love and forgive like Christ: What is the significance of the cross in trekking away from the pain of the past? How might the eternal realities of the soul's created design be utilized to traverse the perilous trails through the labyrinths of bitterness, the gaps of fear, and the sharp crevasses of vengeance? As much of the travel is done during the darkness of despair and hatred, what type of vision is necessary to navigate safely through the endless twists and turns of the journey? What enables the body and soul to last the distance? Most people, after they run the numbers—looking at the odds, considering the cost, and anticipating the wear and tear—ask if it is worth it, can they do it, do they want to take the risk, and are they up for the challenge?

#### **Created and Fallen Tendencies**

At the beginning of the trek, the roadway is pretty monotonous, quickly lulling the soul into the routine of shifting, braking, steering, and staying on the course. In an attempt to deal with the past, the soul fixates on the regularities of life in the midst of suffering, rarely reaching into the realm of redemption and the relevancy of the cross. Reeling from the pain of brokenness, the finiteness of life is accentuated as the darkness of unforgiveness blinds the eyes to love. Suffering seems to slow down time, and as the

one suffering withdraws from God and others, the soul constricts under the relentless pressure of the temporality of time and existence. Unexpected betrayal results in lack of trust. Unjustified abuse leads to fear and anxiety. Prolonged pain produces hopelessness and despair. The response to suffering takes its toll; the vehicle slams into a deep crater and gets stuck, especially without transcendent help.

### **Crossing the Past**

The deep crater of the past is actually impassable and demands transcendence. God, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, provides the only thing that can span the channel and enable the soul to ascend from the depths of despair caused by sin—the cross of Jesus Christ. Christ came from the infinite, eternal, holy realm of heaven into the finite, temporal, sinful world to redeem a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds (Titus 2:14)—most powerfully displayed through love and forgiveness. He redeems the past, present, and future realities of the soul in preparation for the ultimate wedding at the end of time. God's forgiveness of the sins of the world is found in the cross of Christ; the key to human forgiveness is also found in the cross of Christ. The cross spans the impassable crater of the past, guaranteeing safe passage as redeemed souls step by faith from the past to the future in forgiveness.

### **The Created Eternal Design**

God created the human soul to last for eternity, with the ability to endure temporal suffering. Given that divine love is poured out into hearts of redeemed souls (cf. Rom 5:5), the supreme grace of God rallies all subordinate graces to fortify and sustain the soul to withstand the jars and bruises of the treacherous terrain of life. The eternal capacity to smell enables the soul to pick up and follow the aroma of Christ above the toxic exhaust of bitterness, despair, and hatred, which dull the senses and lead back to the paths of the past. The ears of the soul are made to listen to the sweet serenade of the truth, as opposed to the sirens of falsehood. As the soul makes its way

down the paths that lead to life, the eternal ears discern between the frequencies of righteousness and the rattling of unrighteousness. The eternal heart beats steadily to the syncopation of divine love during the daring maneuvers of love and forgiveness. Painful memories flash in the dark valleys, temporarily blinding the eyes of faith, but the focus upon Christ is quickly regained. The eternal will, redeemed by grace, learns to shift with increasing smoothness as the soul repeatedly submits to the Father in incremental steps of faithful obedience throughout the daily hairpin experiences of life. The eternal soul is masterfully designed to endure the harrowing routes associated with the journey of forgiveness. The remarkable reality is that the soul gets stronger and more resolute in its travels with each sanctifying mile.

### **Eyes to See Divine Love**

The eyes of the soul are often blinded by the flying dust and debris of unforgiveness. As the embittered heart shrinks towards hardness, the acuity of vision reduces to nearsightedness. The “disease of introspection” (Payne, 2002, p. 183) and rumination cause the eyes to cloud with self-deception and self-righteousness. Despair and depression darken the horizon, narrow the peripheral vision, and dilate the pupils as they strain to see any glimmer of light. The eyes cannot see above the ridge of unforgiveness, and they grow weary from the constant grimace of shame.

As the soul looks to the hills and desperately seeks help from the Lord (Pss 121; 88:13), the eyes once again catches a glimpse of the beauty and glory of Christ (2 Cor 4:6) and the “smoking flax” within the soul, created and sustained by divine love but “mingled with corruption” (Sibbes, 1630/1998, p. 18), once again bursts into flames. The soul is able to see in ever-increasing clarity God’s mercy, abiding presence, and the fullness of His glory. The soul expands as the eyes once again encounter Love Himself. The soul also develops a different perspective—in viewing itself, the past offense and offender, the present promises of God, and the future hope of

His glory. The eternal and infinite love of God radically alters the landscape of tragedy and brings about a righteous disposition that seeks love and forgiveness. Even though hurtful experiences of the past distort the soul's identity, the powerfully creative love of God is more than able to take the brokenness and make an even more intricate and beautiful soul that images God in a glorious way. The journey towards forgiveness crosses over the peak and heads down the other side of the mountain.

### **Eyes to See Eternity**

The redeemed soul not only has eyes to see divine love, but the eyes can also see eternity in the midst of the temporal, tangible world. Time is measured with a chronometer in one sense, but in another, the existence of time is mysterious. Kierkegaard (1847/1995) describes the present as merely the boundary between the future and the past. The past is what the present was; in other words, the past is the actual. The future is “when the eternal is in the temporal” (p. 249), which allows for possibility. Besides the previously mentioned supernatural realities afforded to the created soul, there are several other significant implications associated with the reality of the eternal in the temporal. First, the eyes of faith enable the soul to interact with and to hope in the eternal God of possibilities, knowing that the eternal is always in the temporal—Immanuel—“God with us” (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23). Remembering God's abiding presence provides comfort and peace in the midst of chaos. Also, the reality of God working all things together for good to those who love Him (Rom 8:28) brings assurance that, even if things do not make sense, He is ultimately taking care of His children. Second, a suffering soul longs for consolation. The temporal convention of suffering begins with hurt, followed by loss of joy, followed by consolation. With the existence of the eternal joy of God, Christian consolation is radically unconventional. Available at the beginning, end, or during a period of suffering, Christian consolation “comes with the head start of eternity and swallows up the pain, as it were, since

the pain and the loss of joy are the momentary—even if the moment were years—are the momentary that is drowned in the eternal” (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995, p. 64). There is nothing that the world offers that compares to the dynamic work of God in bringing consolation. Third, believing in the present reality of the eternal, the trials experienced in the temporal world deepens the soul’s understanding and trust in the eternal realities that will ultimately be manifested in the future. God’s present work of redemption brings equal assurance of His future work of judgment, vengeance, and wrath. This point is crucial when the soul is struggling with unforgiveness because of the presence of both the created and fallen desire for justice. To place vengeance and justice in the hands of God, trusting that He is not indifferent or inept in dealing with sin, requires faith. Forgiveness does not satisfy justice but trusts that God will bring about ultimate justice for all moral evil, either through redemption or eternal punishment.

The journey of forgiveness is very different for the redeemed soul who is created to partake in the eternal realities of God that are at work in the temporal world. The trek towards forgiveness, though difficult and often treacherous, is possible through the dynamic work of God’s love in the human soul. Nothing other than divine love compels one to love an enemy sacrificially so that the enemy might come to love God deeply, and in the process, become a neighbor. To love another in the face of sin and its consequences is to love and forgive like Christ.

### **A Three-fold Dynamic for Developing a Heart of Love**

Forgiveness involves working through hurtful memories and emotions, dealing with issues of the past and future, and struggling with the chaos in the soul associated with unforgiveness. However, the most important aspect of forgiveness is the creative, conforming and communing work of God’s love in the soul as it deals with the cognitions, emotions, and volitions. The theocentric definitions of love and forgiveness establish the foundation, structure, and essence of the dynamics of human

forgiveness:

*Love is a work of God in the human soul that compels one to give oneself for another, regardless of the cost, so that the other might love God more deeply.*

*Forgiveness is a work of God's love in the human soul that compels one to give oneself for another, despite being sinned against, so that the other might love God more deeply.*

God plays a central role in the dynamics of forgiveness as He works through His Spirit of love to overcome a spirit of unforgiveness. One of the main tasks of forgiveness is to restore and strengthen the wounded heart of the offended so that she can love, despite being sinned against, for the purpose of redeeming the heart of the offender.

Consistent with living the Christian life, the dynamics of forgiveness involve three aspects crucial in developing a heart of increasing purity that is disposed to love and forgive like Christ: a growing intimacy with Christ, a growing identity in Christ, and a growing imitation of Christ. Milton (1673) expressed a similar approach to the essence of the Christian life:

The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him. (p. 3)

Intimacy, or closeness, with Christ results in a more personal knowledge of and affection for God. Identity in Christ results in increased conformity to the mind and attitude of Christ. Imitation is the fruit of God's love in the heart that disposes one to walk in the righteous ways of God. This three-fold model of developing a heart of love and forgiveness is not a rigid, sequential approach to forgiveness; rather, the three aspects weave in and out in various orders, simultaneously at times, in response to the work of God's Spirit. There is, however, a general pattern for developing a heart of love: (1) The soul needs to draw close to God before (2) a growing identity in Christ develops over time, and (3) it is through time with God and a transforming identity found in Christ that the soul is able to carry out God's law of love in a delightful, rather

than dutiful way. This model of forgiveness also fully acknowledges the mixture of grace and sinfulness in the redeemed soul (Sibbes, 1630/1998). Specifically, in both unforgiveness and forgiveness, there is the co-existence of good and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness, given the reality of the ongoing work of sanctification in soul. In this life, the Christian experiences authentic yet momentary times of intimacy with Christ, genuine yet incremental and increasing identity in Christ, and actual yet imperfect imitation of Christ. There is great hope in knowing and remembering that God, who begins His loving and gracious transformation in the redeemed soul, will perfect His sanctifying work until the day of Christ (cf. Phil 1:6).

### *Forgiveness Involves Intimacy with Christ*

In the scheme of redemptive history, the challenges, disappointments, and deep hurts experienced in relationships are meant to perfect one's relationship with God. God uses the details of the fallen life to produce a longing for Him. Intimacy with the ever-present, infinite, eternal God is paramount with regards to forgiveness (cf. Allender & Longman, 1992; Shults & Sandage, 2003)—intimacy settles the soul like no other, satisfies the soul's deep hunger and thirst, and sanctifies the heart of the soul.

### **Intimacy with Christ Settles the Soul**

The wounded soul, tossed to and fro by the relentless wind and waves of unforgiveness, desperately seeks solace in the midst of the storm. Restless and irritable, the soul is distracted by the disillusionment and drone of internal struggles (Powlison, 2003). The soul moans, sensing a growing disconnect or distance from God, and wails, looking for relief and rescue, after being submerged by the uncontrollable events of life. The soul despairs and begins to drown with hopelessness.

Psalm 31 is a hymn of complaint and praise written by David to God in the midst of suffering, both from inward iniquities and external adversaries. In the psalm's twenty four verses, David illustrates how a deeply disturbed soul is settled by drawing

close to God, depending upon Him for refuge, and acknowledging that deliverance comes only through His righteousness.

The turbulence of life causes commotion in the soul and draws its attention toward the crisis and hurtful consequences. Most turmoil requiring forgiveness involve adversaries who slander, terrorize, scheme against, persecute, and shame the offended (Pss 31:11-13; 15b; 17-18). Distracted by the injustice, evil, and pain, the body and soul become restless and distressed, not only over the sins committed against it, but also from its own sins (Ps 31:9-10). Over time, if left to the moving currents of unforgiveness, the soul becomes increasingly agitated, losing all sense of serenity and security. God seems like a fading lighthouse, growing progressively dim with distance as the cries for help have gone seemingly unanswered. Hopelessness feeds on the plankton of despair and the darkness of depression looms on the horizon.

Seeing the affliction and hearing the cries for help (Ps 31:7, 22), the Spirit of God moves in and compels the soul to draw near to Him as the soul struggles to stay afloat. The soul is fully aware of the reality and presence of the eternal God as it clings to Him for sustenance and hope in the midst of despair. The soul flails less frantically as it redirects its focus and meditates upon the truths about God and His promises. The soul supernaturally remembers the only relationship that offers true, unfailing hope—“You are my God . . . [and I am] Your servant” (Ps 31:14b, 16a). Drawing close to God redirects the soul from the disturbing distractions to the source of incomparable peace and righteousness (Phil 4:7; Ps 73:28). The soul begins to settle as it grows still before God, knowing that His lovingkindness and goodness prevails.

Drawn back to God, the soul begins to depend more on God for refuge and strength. The soul relies upon the ageless, immutable God to be the rock (Ps 31:1-2) and beacon of light in the sea of unforgiveness. The chaos in the soul created by the uncontrollable winds of life is tamed by knowing that God, who controls the winds and waves (cf. Matt 8:27), dwells mightily in the soul. The soul settles even more as it

commits its spirit to the Lord, trusting in His everlasting ways and providential timing (Ps 31:5a; 6b; 14a; 15a) and finding renewed strength and courage as it hopes in the Lord (Ps 31:24).

The soul gains composure not only through turning from the debilitating distractions, drawing close to God, and depending upon Him for refuge, but also trusting in God for ultimate deliverance from evil and unrighteousness, even death itself. The soul knows through the Spirit of God that deliverance comes from the Lord's righteousness (Ps 31:1c). God leads and guides the soul through the dangerous seas of unforgiveness to the glorious pools of His redemptive love for His name's sake (Ps 31:3b), saving the body and soul in His lovingkindness (Ps 31:16b). The soul finds rest and serenity knowing ultimately, that both body and soul will be delivered from evil and dwell in the house of the Lord forevermore (Ps 23:6).

The disorder in the soul caused by a traumatic offense is real and cannot be dismissed. But what is equally as real is the Spirit of the eternal God abiding in the redeemed soul—this truth cannot be dismissed for the sake of the soul. The soul is designed to be settled specifically through intimacy with its Creator and Redeemer:

You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. (Augustine, 1952b, Book I, sec. i)

### **Intimacy with Christ Satisfies the Soul**

As the distressed soul is pulled from the turbulent seas and settles in the sparkling pools of divine love, it is parched from prolonged exposure to the elements of unforgiveness and famished for spiritual nourishment. In God's infinite wisdom, the weary, but settled soul, hungers and thirsts for righteousness (Matt 5:6) and pants for the life giving waters of God (Ps 42:1), finding unsurpassing satisfaction and restoration. The soul expands as it takes in increasing measures of the wisdom and knowledge of Christ (Col 1:9-10; 2:2-3), love of Christ (John 15:9-10), joy of Christ

(John 15:11), power of Christ (1 Cor 12:9-10), peace of Christ (Col 3:15), and words of Christ (John 15:7; Col 3:16). The redeemed soul filled with Christ and His divine love is truly satisfied.

A soul settled and deeply satisfied in Christ develops meekness, the capacity to “absorb” the sins from others and to commit the wrongdoings to Christ (Ps 37:5). “Patience,” or long-suffering, (1 Cor. 13:4), and “humility and gentleness” (Matt 11:29; Eph 4:2; Col 3:12; cf. Ps 37:11, Gal 5:23) are other Scriptural terms used to describe the Christian grace that enables the soul to deal with sin and suffering like Christ.

Meekness is directly correlated with the soul’s satisfaction in Christ and love for God:

as love to God prevails, it tends to set persons above human injuries, in this sense, that the more they love God, the more they will place all their happiness in him. They will look to God as their all, and seek their happiness and portion in his favour, and that not in the allotments of his providence alone; the more they love God, the less they set their hearts on their worldly interests, which are all that their enemies can touch. Men can injure God's people only with respect to worldly good. But the more a man loves God, the less is his heart set on the things of the world, and the less he feels the injuries that his enemies may inflict, because they cannot reach beyond these things. And so it often is the case, that the friends of God hardly think the injuries they receive from men are worthy of the name of injuries; and the calm and quietness of their minds are scarcely disturbed by them. (Edwards, 1852/2000, p. 81)

Edwards provides two illustrations of what satisfied souls look like when sinned against. First, satisfied souls are compared to a serene pool of water. Regardless of the “evils that they may suffer” or “what injuries may be inflicted on them,” the souls barely ripple, as if undisturbed (1952/1998, p. 81). Second, according to history, when the Persians laid siege on Babylon, the Babylonians laughed in the face of their enemies as they stood protected on the perches of their fortified walls. Similarly, souls saturated with divine love and built with the brick and mortar of meekness are able to endure and bear all sufferings directed their way (1952/1998, p. 86; cf. 1 Cor 13:7). Therefore, satisfied, meek souls have the best armor to absorb the pain of sinful offenses, to route the suffering to Christ, and to forgive by covering the sins with the overflow of divine love.

Intimacy with Christ plays a critical role in the dynamics of forgiveness. The soul filled with unforgiveness begins to settle by drawing near to Christ, depending upon the refuge of His faithfulness, and hoping in His ultimate deliverance. However, there is one other important outcome from the soul's intimacy with Christ—sanctification of the heart.

### **Intimacy with Christ Sanctifies the Heart**

The soul is able to be still before the Lord as it becomes more composed and satisfied in Christ. When the redeemed soul sits in silence before its Creator and Redeemer, it is simultaneously stunned by the absolute holiness of God and the desperately dark condition of its heart, ravished by the overwhelming influence of unforgiveness and other forms of depravity. Through increased intimacy with Christ, the soul is strengthened and reoriented in a Godward manner and is more capable and willing to look at the depths of its heart with God's eyes; however, the heart is not able to change itself. By God's design, divine love relentlessly works in a creative and conforming way to sanctify the heart so that it can forgive authentically with the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:32).

### ***A Heart of Forgiveness***

What does it mean to forgive from the heart (Matt 18:35)? In referring to other passages, there is the command to “fervently love one another from the heart” after having purified the soul “for a sincere love of the brethren” (1 Pet 1:22); Paul's statement that the goal of his “instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim 1:5); the beatitude that those who “are the pure in heart” will see God (Matt 5:8); and Paul's exhortation to “flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Tim 2:22). One can conclude that forgiveness must flow from a pure

heart, a heart redeemed, occupied, and dominated by divine love.

A heart dominated and governed with unforgiveness and all of its impurities is far from Christ (cf. Mark 7:6), proud in thoughts (cf. Luke 1:51), hardened by hatred (cf. Matt 19:8; Mark 8:17; John 12:40), and tainted by the delicacies of bitterness and vengeance (cf. Luke 12:34). Therefore, forgiveness cannot flow from an impure heart subjugated by unloving thoughts and affections. The love of Christ is the only antidote powerful and pure enough to cleanse the heart. Only divine love can purify and dispose the heart to love and forgive in a way that pleases God—from a pure heart. As the Spirit of the Lord brings about an awareness of the unrighteous fruits—self-righteousness, self-deception, and self-centeredness, etc.—that keep the heart from fully forgiving the offender, the soul confesses its sins (Ps 32:5) and cries out to God for His love to work in and through its heart so that it can freely forgive. The soul, compelled by the Spirit of love, yearns to forgive by “faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). The redeemed heart softens by the kindness of the Lord (Rom 2:4) and experiences an increasing strength and joy in the Lord, along with a sense of personal gratitude for God’s mercy and grace. A supernatural transformation takes place by the gracious work of God’s Spirit. God grants beauty to rise up from out of the ashes of resentment, joy to break forth from the mourning of injustice, and praise to emanate from the ruins of despairing bitterness. The heart increases in sanctification as the soul forgives from a heart of faith in Christ alone.

### ***A Growing Awareness***

Intimacy with Christ brings about another phenomenon helpful in the sanctifying process of the heart—there is a simultaneous awareness of the sobering reality of one’s depravity and the unfathomable reality of one’s forgiveness in Christ. One of the realities of the heart is that it is prone to wander, forgetting the depths of its sinfulness and taking for granted the grace under which it lives. Evidence of this

dynamic is that Christians are just as likely to hold grudges, entertain resentment, and judge offenders. In other words, it is far too easy for Christians to be unforgiving when they are sinned against. It is ironic that those who have been forgiven much fail to love much (cf. Luke 7:47). The Gospel itself is minimized and mocked when those forgiven and saved by grace fail to forgive those who sin against them (Hong, 1984; cf. Matt 18:23-35). A continual “consciousness of sin” and “forgiveness of sin” is a dialectic that is necessary for one to live in a “state of forgiveness” (Hong 1984, p. 45). In other words, a deeper understanding of one’s sins leads to a deeper understanding of forgiveness in Christ, which, in turn, leads to loving and forgiving like Christ.

A soul that dwells regularly in the presence of the Lord experiences immeasurable joy and pleasure (Ps 16:11) and grows in contentment, like a weaned child who rests against his mother (Ps 131:2). Moreover, as the growing realization of sinfulness is countered by the growing understanding of the amazing grace of the cross, divine love brings about increasing conformity in the soul. Over time, the overflow of love of Christ heals deep hurts and redirects the soul outward to others. Holy affections issue from the depths of the heart, extending the soul so that it develops a growing burden for the souls of others, thus enabling the offended to move towards the offender and others in a redemptive manner. Such other-centered love builds up the body of Christ and serves as a glorious testimony to the redemptive love of God.

Intimacy with Christ not only helps to settle, satisfy, and sanctify the soul, but facilitates the fulfillment of the first great commandment. Consequently, intimacy with Christ serves to keep the heart under divine rulership so that the joy found in Christ overflows to gladly meet the needs of others (Piper, 1996) through neighbor and enemy love, thus fulfilling the second great commandment. Furthermore, intimacy with Christ is the primary means through which the redeemed soul begins the transformation to its true identity.

### *Forgiveness Involves Identity with Christ*

Shame blankets the self's identity after layers of rejection, abuse, neglect, and other unloving experiences adhere to the soul. The soul sees itself as unlovable, worthless, flawed, invaluable, and insignificant. It is not surprising that shame-prone individuals tend to be less forgiving and less likely to seek forgiveness, or develop empathy for others (Konstam et al., 2001; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Therefore, untwisting and reshaping the distorted identity of the soul is essential for working towards forgiveness. But how should the soul's identity be reconfigured? The answer—an identity founded on and formed by the contours of Christ.

#### **Identity with Christ Shapes the Self**

The real identity of the redeemed soul is one who is deeply loved, completely forgiven of all sins, and securely related to the sovereign God of heaven and earth. As intimacy with God settles, satisfies, and sanctifies the soul, the self begins to develop a growing awareness of its supernatural union with Christ. A soul disfigured by the temporal and tragic experiences of life is gently and lovingly reshaped by the eternity of divine love as it floods the soul. The incessant waves of grace wear down the shoreline of shame to reveal the true identity of the soul hidden in Christ (Col 3:3). The finite mind transcends temporality as it meditates on the unfathomable riches of Christ—for instance, reflecting on the truth that one who is in Christ was united with Him in eternity past—being chosen before the foundations of the world (Eph 1:4-6); united with Christ two thousand years ago—having died, raised up, and seated with Him in the heavenly realms (Rom 6:8; Eph 2:6); united with Him in the present—abiding with Him (John 15:5) as Christ lives in the redeemed soul (Gal 2:20); and united with Him in eternity future—dwelling in the house of the Lord forevermore (Ps 23:6; John 14:3) (Johnson, 2002). Such glorious and beautiful truths begin to untwist distorted identities. Additionally, as the soul draws into a more intimate and identifiable relationship with Christ, it becomes more transparent and dependent upon

God, moving closer to the true self, created unique and intentionally by God (Kierkegaard, 1849/1989).

Meditating on the glorious truths and promises of God plays a significant role in reshaping the soul's identity; however, an important reality of redemptive history is that even though the redeemed soul is fully justified before God, the work of redemption is far from complete. As a necessary counterbalance to the eternal realities of Christ, the temporal realities of sinfulness cannot be ignored or denied but realized in increasing ways. Without this simultaneous knowledge of being sinful and sanctified, the soul increases in self-righteousness. Growing intimacy and identity with Christ should not only reveal the contours of righteousness, but also the deep valleys of unrighteousness furrowed in the depths of the heart. God's purpose in revealing the depths of depravity is not to lead to despair, but to lead to humility and worship—humility in response to the growing awareness of how far one falls short of God's holiness, and worship in response to God's amazing grace in view of the soul's continual rebellion against its Redeemer.

As the soul gains sustenance, strength, and security in Christ, the self is "free to manifest grace" by loving and forgiving its enemies (Shults & Sandage, 2003, p. 180). Forgiveness exercises the muscles of divine love and also shapes the soul's identity through its obedience to God's law of love (cf. Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, Enright, 2001). No longer does the soul see itself as a passive victim but as one who actively lives by faith in the One who provides redemption, sustaining grace, and protection. Furthermore, by moving toward righteousness through forgiveness, the soul moves away from the unrighteous tendencies of unforgiveness that not only plague the soul, but also shape the soul in the image of the offender (Volf, 1996; cf. Jones, 1995).

## **Identity with Christ Impacts Relationships**

Forgiveness not only requires self-understanding but also an understanding of self in relation to others (Neu, 2002). Humility emerges from the realization that God's saving grace is the only thing that makes one distinct from others in the community of sinful humanity—every human soul is equivalent in worth and depravity.

Consequently, compassion and empathy toward others increase, as well as a growing burden for others to know and taste the goodness of God. As the soul humbly grows in identity with Christ, the walls of self-protection begin to crumble, the filters of self-righteousness begin to tear, and the inward funnel of self-absorption begins to bend outward towards others; consequently, the self begins to expand and extend itself towards others in divine love. The soul's identity continues to develop as human relationships are perceived and experienced differently through the lens of God's redemptive work.

The efficacious work of divine love on the soul's identity also narrows the impassable divide between offended and offender. The offender is seen less as an enemy, as similarities become evident in light of the cross of Christ. The shrinking divide and expanding commonality makes it easier for the offended to move toward the offender. Not only is the identity of the offended shaped through forgiveness, but the offender's identity is impacted as well. As the offended forgives and redemptively relates to the offender, the offender is encouraged to find intimacy and identity in the God who offers living water at no cost for all who come and drink (John 4:14; Isa 55:1-3).

## **Identity Shaped by the Body of Christ**

Part of God's created design is for the human soul to develop and mature through relationships. God places enormous significance upon the community of believers by equating it with the body of Christ (Eph 4:12; Rom 7:4). The health of the

body is measured by love and unity between the different members. There are several important implications that the concept of body life has on the soul's identity. First, there is no such thing as an autonomous soul within the body of Christ. Therefore, the identity of the individual soul does not develop in isolation to the body but in active involvement with the body. Second, because the body is spiritually one—one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph 4:4-6)—the individual members of the body make up one body connected to one head, who is Christ. Therefore, the soul's identity should be a reflection of the single soul of the body, that being the single life of Christ. Third, there is no separation between the love for the head (Christ) and love for the body (Christ's body)—all is divine love (Burnaby, 1938). Therefore, the love that shapes the identity of one member is at work shaping the identities of all members into the identity of Christ. Fourth, the organic connection between members of the same body illustrates the concept if one member suffers, the body suffers; if one member is honored, the body rejoices (cf. 1 Cor 12:26). Consequently, the distorted identity of each member of the body has a direct impact on the entire body, thus highlighting the critical importance of soul care within the body of Christ. Finally, love within the body needs to endure all things for the sake of unity: "Intolerance kills love and dismembers the Body" (Burnaby, 1938, p. 103). Disunity within the body is dangerous and must be addressed for the sake of the body's health. Therefore, an ethos of unity within the body for the sake of living out the Gospel shapes the identity of the corporate and individual souls in a Christ-like manner.

Identity in Christ is significant with regards to individual development, the development of interpersonal relationships, and the development of the body of Christ. The efficacious work of divine love carries out the shaping of the soul's identity for the sake of the body, and ultimately for the sake of Christ. Identities reflective of Christ are more apt to love and forgive like Christ; therefore, emphasis on the development of the soul's identity is a key aspect in the dynamics of forgiveness. Furthermore, souls who

are intimate with Christ and whose identities reflect Christ are disposed to imitate Christ.

### *Forgiveness Involves Imitation of Christ*

Intimacy with Christ disposes the thoughts and affections of the heart towards righteousness. Identity with Christ makes the soul simultaneously aware of its righteousness in Christ and its unrighteousness in the depths of the heart. Imitation of Christ, the doing of righteousness, is the fruit of a heart and soul tilled and fertilized by divine love. Imitating Christ starts with a willingness to follow the will and ways of Christ, followed by the self-denial of the will and ways of the flesh that are contrary to Christ. As divine love prevails in the soul, one is compelled by the strength of God's grace to do the righteous work of forgiveness.

### **Imitation of Christ in Willingness**

Augustine's description of love as the "soul's movement" (cited in Burnaby, 1938, p. 94), implies that love is an active force in the human soul, a "directive energy of the will" (Burnaby, 1938). The divine love of God flows from God and works dynamically in and through the human soul. The supreme grace of divine love plants itself on the "faculty of the will . . . [which is] the fountain of the practice" (Edwards, 1852/2000, pp. 227-228). In other words, divine love directly influences the disposition of the heart—creating and nurturing a willingness and desire to pursue righteousness (cf. Cunningham, 1985; Hong, 1984). Therefore, the gracious work of divine love compels the soul to love God as the way of experiencing fullness of joy, and to love others as the way of building up the body of Christ.

The dynamics of divine love in the wounded soul is the key factor in compelling the will to imitate Christ in the costly work of forgiving love. The willingness to love despite being sinned against is a desire wrought by God. Such a willingness to imitate Christ requires an "inversion of values" (Piper, 1979, p. 78)—

loving for redemptive purposes versus hating for condemning purposes; returning good for evil versus evil for evil; praying for and blessing one's enemies versus praying against and cursing them; and giving one's life for one's enemies versus taking their lives.

### **Imitation of Christ in Self-Denial**

The essence of the Christian life includes denying self or losing one's life for the sake of Christ so that one can gain life in Christ (cf. Luke 9:23-24; Phil 3:8). The immediate connotations of such sacrificial concepts are negative and unappealing; however, when viewed with redeemed eyes, the concepts actually connote freedom (from the bondage of self-righteousness and self-centeredness) and incomparable grace (gaining the fullness of life in Christ over one's own mortal life). An aspect of self-denial can be seen as worthy of pursuit if it is understood that the will and ways of the old self are denied so that the will and ways of the new self are unencumbered to pursue and to experience righteousness found in Christ (Heb 12:1). However, the aspect of self-denial associated with God-given desires is more difficult and challenging. Self-denial for Jesus was similar to human self-denial in that part of His struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:36-46) was perhaps the natural desire to avoid physical pain and suffering (since Jesus did not have to forsake any unrighteousness); however, a major aspect of His self-denial included the humility of His incarnation and the pain of spiritual suffering in being separated from His heavenly Father as a result of bearing the sins of the world. Jesus denied His natural desires and the fullness of His divine glory for the sake of doing the Father's will.

In unforgiveness, the heart tends to be dominated by the self-glorifying, self-preserving will of the flesh more so than the transcendent love of God. Thus, the powerful dynamics of unforgiveness—pride, disunity, malice, bitterness, and vengeance—are the parts that are to be denied, to be crucified, to be destroyed, so that

the Spirit of Christ dominates. Therefore, within the context of forgiveness, the self-denial that God requires is the denial of unrighteous desires that keep the soul from a life driven by “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). In other words, self-denial is giving up the contrary ways of the flesh as a means of doing the will of God. Self-denial enables the soul to imitate Christ by forsaking the unrighteousness of unforgiveness in order to move towards the offender in redemptive love. Inherent to self-denial is the call to suffer like Christ in order to love like Christ.

### *Suffering like Christ*

Christ suffered with the goal of redemption in mind (John 3:16; Isa 53:5; 1 Pet 2:24). He “endured the cross, despising the shame” for the joy set before him (Heb 12:2). Jesus Christ was compelled by the love of God to lay down His life for His enemies so that they might have eternal life in Him. The sufferings of Christ served as an example for Paul as he considered his sufferings as light and momentary compared to the eternal weight of glory to be revealed in the consummation (2 Cor 4:17). As heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, redeemed souls are called to share in the sufferings of Christ (Rom 8:17; Phil 1:29; 2 Tim 2:3) and “entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right” (1 Pet 4:19), to include ultimate justice (cf. Pss 37, 73)

Forsaking all for Christ is a practical means to holiness, as suffering challenges any and all attachments that a soul may have to this world or to itself:

If there be any one kind or degree of temporal suffering that we have not a spirit to undergo for Christ, then there is something that we do not forsake for him. For example, if we are not willing to suffer reproach for Christ, then we are not willing to forsake honour for him. And so if we are not willing to suffer poverty, pain, and death for his sake, then we are not willing to forsake wealth, ease, and life for him. (Edwards, 1852/2000, p. 259)

Applying this concept of suffering and forsaking as a means of sanctification to the context of forgiveness, one concludes that an unwillingness to forsake the desires of unforgiveness for the sake of the righteousness (forgiveness through way of enemy

love) hinders the spiritual growth of the soul in general, and the soul's ability to fully love God in particular. In this sense, failure to forsake unforgiveness results in a failure to enjoy the blessings and joys found in loving God more intimately and loving others more generously. Unwillingness to suffer for the sake of Christ by forgiving also hinders the ongoing development of the soul's identity in Christ. Ultimately, the driving force behind the work of love in suffering like Christ is the exaltation and preservation of God's glory and pleasure.

### ***Loving like Christ***

Self-denial is inherent to divine love. The supreme grace of love settles for nothing less than God's perfection (Matt 5:48) and mercy (Luke 6:36). The costly nature of divine love, in its quest to carry out the redemptive work of God, requires like suffering in the souls in which it dwells, as evident by His law of love. Loving like Christ, for the sake of Christ, is costly. To counter the seemingly rigorous requirements placed on the redeemed soul, it must be remembered that God supplies what he demands. Moreover, divine love disposes the heart to love like Christ, and the soul, empowered by grace, grows in its ability to love sacrificially with experience. Furthermore, the soul increases in its desire to love in a Christ-like way in grateful response to experiencing the redemptive love of God all the days of its life (cf. Morris, 1981).

An aspect of being able to love like Christ is being constrained and ruled by His love (cf. Sibbes, 1630/1998). Hodge (1994) contends that such constraint is the essence of being a Christian (cf. 2 Cor 5:14-15):

A Christian is one who recognizes Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, as God manifested in the flesh, loving us and dying for our redemption; and who is so affected by a sense of the love of this incarnate God as to be constrained to make the will of Christ the rule of his obedience, and the glory of Christ the great end for which he lives. (p. 133)

Piper (1997) adds that the truth of Christ's love "presses in on us. It grips and

holds; it impels and controls. It surrounds us and won't let us run from it. It cages us into joy" (p. 60). To be so ruled by the love of Christ results in joyful submission of the will and persevering denial of the self, all for the sake of righteousness and the glory of God.

Developing a heart of forgiveness requires the soul to be constrained by the love of Christ. However, a heart overwhelmed with unforgiveness is constrained by its sinful appendages—bitterness, malice, self-righteousness, and desires for vengeance. Therefore, it is critical for the unforgiving soul to seek intimacy with Christ and to find its true identity in Him so that divine love prevails in the heart. A heart constrained by the love of Christ is driven more by the aching burden for the offender to experience the redemptive love of God more than the ache in one's own soul caused by the transgression. Redemptive love issues forth in forgiveness from a heart captivated by the beauty and purposes of the love of Christ.

### ***Strength in Weakness***

To imitate Christ in suffering and love is beyond the abilities of the human soul. However, just as the Lord multiplied the widow's meager supply of flour and oil to feed Elijah for months (1 Kings 17), and just as the Lord multiplied five loaves and two fish to feed over five thousand people (Matt 14:13-21; Mark 6:36-44; Luke 9:12-17), so too can the Lord move the soul to forgiveness. God, through the power of His grace, amplifies the last reverberation of love that remains in the depths of the heart, multiplies the last ounce of strength that is left, and inflames the faintest desire to please God. The redeemed soul is indeed strong when it is weak, for God's grace is sufficient (2 Cor 12:9-10). God is greatly glorified when the soul is empowered by the Spirit of love to overwhelm the stronghold of unforgiveness. This type of love and forgiveness is the most realistic application of suffering for the sake of the Gospel. Apart from the freeing work of Christ, the soul can do nothing of eternal value (John 15:4), but can do

anything through Christ who gives God-glorifying strength (Phil 4:13).

### **Imitation of Christ in Doing Righteousness**

Jesus Christ is wholly submissive to the will and ways of His Father. Jesus makes it clear that every aspect of His life—words and actions (John 6:38; 12:49-50; 14:31)—is in synch with the life of His Father, and that nothing is done from His own initiative (John 5:5:30; 8:28; 8:42; 14:10). Given the mysterious union with Christ, every believer is required to live this same submissive, synchronous life with Christ. Jesus makes this point by stating that love for Him is demonstrated by keeping His commandments (John 14:15, 21, 23) and by following His example in serving others and denying self (John 13:15; 12:26). Jesus further explains that His Father and the world recognizes disciples of Christ as they bear much righteous fruit—displayed most beautifully and powerfully through sacrificial love and forgiveness (John 13:35; 15:8; cf. 12:14; Eph 4:32-5:2). Fortunately, the redeemed soul is not left to its own resources to imitate Christ. Jesus speaks of the divine Paraclete, the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17, 26; 16:5-15), who stirs the heart to holy actions and affections and guides disciples “into all the truth” (John 16:13). Consequently, by following the righteous commands of Christ, the soul abides in the love of Christ and experiences the fullness of Christ’s joy (John 15:10-11).

### ***Compelled towards Righteousness***

Divine love disposes the heart to holy practice since true grace influences the will and leads to acts of grace (Edwards, 1852/2000). A hatred for unrighteousness and a love for righteousness increase as the soul grows in conformity to Christ. As the affections and desires of the heart change, so do the actions of the soul. Paul writes of the dual action of “putting off” the unrighteous aspects of the old self while “putting on” the righteous aspects of the new self (Eph 4:17-5:2; Col 3:1-17). In these two

passages, almost every aspect of unforgiveness is found in the list of things to put aside while almost every aspect of love and forgiveness is included in the list of things to put on. Love is emphasized last in each of these passages as the virtue that is above and beyond all other virtues to put on the new self (Eph 5:1-2; Col 3:14). Furthermore, in the letter to the Colossians, Paul adds an additional exhortation for the peace of Christ to rule in the heart and the words of Christ to dwell in the soul, doing all in the name of Christ with thanksgiving and praise (Col 3:15-17). Paul is fully aware that divine governance of the heart compels the soul towards righteousness, which then leads to delightful obedience to the will and ways of Christ.

### ***Joyful Imitation***

Love of righteousness is the key to obeying any and all of God's commands, especially His law of love. Loving and forgiving others out of moralistic duty is drudgery, disobedience, and divergence from Christ-likeness:

... if the law's command is performed through fear of punishment, not through love of righteousness, it is performed slavishly, not freely, and therefore is not performed at all. For there can be no good fruit that does not ripen from the root of love. And if we have the faith that works through love, we begin to delight in the law of God according to the inner man, a delighting which is the gift not of the Letter but of the Spirit. (Augustine, cited in Burnaby, 1938, p. 233)

Keeping the commands of Christ with delight (Pss 1:2; 40:8; 119) is evidence that one abides in the love of Christ, for the joy of Christ fills the soul of one who delights in doing righteousness (John 15:10-11). There are several reasons why joyful obedience to God's command to love and forgive is possible. First, joy is "perfect acquiescence in God's will, because the soul delights itself in God" (Graham, 1981, p. 140). Submitting to the will of God is always best for the soul. The most excellent example of divine joy through submission is seen in Jesus, the author and perfecter of Christian faith—He set His eyes on the joy set before Him as He endured the cross (Heb 12:2). Second, God's command to love one's enemies and to forgive like Christ is paradoxical—God's call to love and forgive is a call to joy. Every command is a

reflection of God's nature, every act of obedience to His commands is an invitation to partake in His nature and to dwell with Him in fullness of joy (Ps 16:11; John 15:11). Third, knowing that the omnipotent God enables the fulfillment of His law of love (Piper, 1979), it is a radical privilege to know that God is intentionally and supernaturally working in the souls of those who are striving to obey the righteous deeds of love and forgiveness.

The three-fold dynamic of forgiveness is essential for the supernatural work of loving and forgiving from a pure heart. Intimacy with Christ settles the chaotic soul, satisfies a soul parched and malnourished by unforgiveness, and sanctifies the entrenched remnants of unrighteousness within the soul. A growing identity in Christ shapes the soul's identity, primarily in relationship with Christ, but also in relationship with others. The soul's growing identity in Christ also impacts relationships, individually and corporately, especially within the body of Christ. As the soul strengthens and regains its Godward focus through intimacy and identity in Christ, it strives to imitate Christ in its willingness to deny self in order to suffer and love like Christ. The soul finds increasing delight in doing righteousness, compelled by the efficacious work of divine love moving and working in the redeemed heart. The dynamic work of God that develops a heart disposed to love and forgive like Christ is the essence of sanctification.

### **Forgiveness: A Journey of Sanctification**

Developing a spirit of forgiveness is in one sense like developing a skill (Enright, 2001; McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1995) or a craft (Jones, 1995), the more forgiveness is exercised, the more readily one is able to forgive. However, much more than skill development, forgiveness requires a change in being—a heart of forgiveness requires transformation of increasing Christ-likeness. The change in the soul needed to move from unforgiveness to forgiveness cannot be done apart from the

efficacious work of God's divine love. Even though God is at work in the soul to bring about His good pleasure, the offended is responsible for working out his/her salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12-13) through growing intimacy and identity with Christ, while striving to imitate Him in love and forgiveness. Therefore, the journey of moving from unforgiveness to forgiveness is a journey of sanctification. Forgiveness is truly a work of God's love in the forgiver's soul that compels her to love sacrificially so that the forgiven might come to love God more deeply.

Forgiveness is a primary means of sanctification that occurs within the context of relationship and sin. The relationships that are impacted by forgiveness are: first and foremost the relationship between the forgiver and God (cf. Cunningham, 1985; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Enright & Gassin, 1992; Hong, 1984; Jones, 1995; MacArthur, 1998; McMinn, 1996; Piper, 1979; Stanley, 1991; Worthington, 2003); second, the relationship between the forgiver and forgiven (cf. Enright & Gassin, 1992); third, possibly the relationship between the one forgiven and God (cf. Allender, 1999b; Enright & Gassin, 1992); and last, the relationship involving the community at large (cf. Cunningham, 1985; Worthington, 2003).

### *Divine Love at Work in the Forgiver*

Divine love does its perfecting work in the soul when God's love is offered to others (1 John 4:12)—generally in neighbor love, most intensely in enemy love. The nature of divine love at work in the soul is that it “can transform its lovers into its own image” (Burnaby, 1938, p. 158). The ability to love sacrificially and redemptively in the face of sin and its consequences is definitely a work of God as He uses the dynamics of forgiveness to re-create His image in the forgiver's soul (Burnaby, 1938). Over time with joyful obedience and practice, loving and forgiving like Christ are regarded no longer as commands per se, but part of living a faith-filled life (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995; Piper, 1979; Jones, 1995). Failure to love others with God's love leaves an

empty place in the soul, designed to be filled by the joy of the Lord and spiritual fruit produced from abiding in the will and ways of Christ (Hong, 1984; cf. John 15:11).

The perfecting work of God's divine love is evident through some tangible changes that take place in the heart of the forgiver. The offended develops a change of heart for the offender, going beyond the empathy described in the forgiveness literature. Not only does the forgiver see the offender in a totally different light—as a fellow sinner who is a part of the community of humanity—but a deep burden emerges for the spiritual welfare of the offender's soul. In a counter intuitive way, the forgiver begins to hurt more for the soul of the offender than her own hurts caused by the offense. The forgiver desires to share God's divine love, hoping that God might bring about repentance, redemption, and reconciliation (Allender, 1999b; Jones, 1995; cf. Rom 2:4; 2 Tim 2:24-26)—in this way, the forgiver shares in God's creative work accomplished through divine love (Burnaby, 1938). The self-denial required to move from unforgiveness to forgiveness is done purposefully, with the eyes of the soul focused on being God's agent of redemption in the offender's soul (cf. Gassin & Enright, 1995). But God's love not only works in the soul of the forgiver, but also in the soul of the one forgiven.

### *Divine Love at Work in the Forgiven*

God's word and work never returns void (cf. Isa 55:11). The initiating and interactive love of God experienced through forgiveness accomplishes several things in the life of the offender. The most obvious thing that forgiveness does is that it points the offender to the perfect love and forgiveness of God (Allender, 1999b; Carson, 2002; Conver, 1984). God uses such encounters with grace to open the eyes of the blind, to release the captives, and to heal the afflicted (cf. Isa 61:1-3). Receiving love from the offended will have some shaping influence on the offender's identity, either through helping him to realize his worth as a person—versus being defined by his immoral

actions (Hampton, 1988)—or by giving him a new relational experience which shapes his view of others. The offender may see his sinfulness more readily after experiencing forgiveness, which in turn, may lead to repentance and a cry for help (Allender, 1999b). The forgiver is not responsible for the response of the one forgiven, but is responsible for sharing God’s divine love. The call is to love and forgive like Christ and to rest in God’s sovereignty for the outcome. Ultimately, the offender who never repents will not escape the wrath of God (Piper, 1979).

### *Divine Love at Work in Community*

Due to the reality of sin within and without the soul, forgiveness is essential to maintaining unity within the community of faith. The living, growing, and developing body of Christ is knit together and built up in the love of God, whereas unforgiveness, disunity, and an absence of love breaks down and even “dismembers” the body (Burnaby, 1938, p. 103). All members face the challenge of remaining steadfast in their love for one another despite being sinned against. This concept of community love is much easier to describe than to do. In fact, it is impossible to fulfill the royal law by relying upon human abilities; however, the individual members and the community at large must remember that God’s Spirit of love dwells in every redeemed soul to will and to work according to His good pleasure. To love like Christ is imperative since loving others within the body is in reality loving the whole Christ, whose head and body compose one person (Burnaby, 1938). In the mean time, as the body loves and forgives like Christ, it shines brightly in a dark world, giving a living testimony to the greatness and power of God’s divine love.

### **Conclusion**

The dynamics of unforgiveness challenges the redeemed soul in the battle for the heart. The commands to love and forgive like Christ challenges the obstinacy of the heart filled with bitterness, hatred, and shame. However, God, in His infinite wisdom

and might, provides the most effective and powerful weapon to ensure complete and final victory—His Spirit of love. God’s divine love works in the soul to bring about increasing intimacy and identity with Christ, so that Christ can be imitated by loving others, even enemies, in a redemptive and God-glorifying way. Love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails” (1 Cor 13:7-8a).

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

There arrives a point in time when a project must come to an end—after realizing the intended goals and reaching the established boundaries. Much research has been accomplished, but there is much more work required. The beginnings of an explicitly theocentric model of forgiveness based on God’s two-fold commandment to love was developed; however, as with any developing paradigm of thought, a myriad of complex and difficult issues associated with life need to be addressed and researched to evaluate, deepen, and strengthen the efforts represented by this present work.

#### **A Theocentric Model of Forgiveness**

A theocentric model of forgiveness begins and ends with God. Since forgiveness originated with God Himself, a God-centered approach to the topic yields an unparalleled way to understand forgiveness. The original vision for this project was to develop a proper theoretical framework, consisting of a theocentric definition and understanding of forgiveness, to serve as a single, comprehensive foundation from which the multitude of practical implications flow.

#### ***The Goals of the Study***

The goals of the project were aggressive— to first conduct an extensive survey of the field, to demonstrate a need for and develop an explicitly theocentric definition of forgiveness, and to work towards a Christian psychology of unforgiveness and forgiveness. Two theses shape the overarching approach taken in this study: (1) The grand theme of God’s redemptive history yields a unified understanding of

forgiveness and provides a foundation and framework from which to build a biblical understanding of forgiveness and (2) a biblical understanding of forgiveness must be developed within the context of God's two-fold commandment to love in general, and derived from a right understanding of divine love in particular. The second thesis not only flows from the first, but also gives critical substance and shape to a theocentric definition of forgiveness.

### **Divergence in the Field**

As seen in an extensive survey (chapter 1), the divergent understanding in the field and the lack of any one definition of forgiveness in the literature provides significant justification for the need for an explicitly theocentric definition of forgiveness. The varied positions found in the clinical areas arise from the fact that the research is not integrally guided by an overarching view of life, God, and humanity, but focuses primarily on the relational and soul dynamics of humanity. The eternity and the holiness of God as Creator and Redeemer bring about a unifying and comprehensive perspective that is required to develop a right definition and understanding of forgiveness.

### **An Outworking of the Two Theses**

Given its divine origins, a right understanding of forgiveness must be consistent with and a derivative of God's redemptive history. Furthermore, since God's two-fold commandment to love is not only a summation, but also the goal of all of His laws, a definition of forgiveness should reflect God's eternal relational paradigm of love that was ushered in by the incarnational ministry of Jesus Christ. Therefore, as a preface for using love as the pathway to understand forgiveness, much effort (chapter 2) was expended in developing an understanding of divine love and God's law of love, which include the two great commandments, Jesus' new commandment of love and enemy love. In fact, the critical question, "Given that only God can forgive sin, what

does God expect when He commands His children to forgive one another like Christ?” drives home the undeniable Scriptural connection between love and forgiveness. The following definitions illustrate the point that forgiveness can be understood as the costly work of divine love in the face of sin for the glory of God:

*Love is a work of God in the human soul that compels one to give oneself for another, regardless of the cost, so that the other might love God more deeply.*

*Forgiveness is a work of God's love in the human soul that compels one to give oneself for another, despite being sinned against, so that the other might love God more deeply.*

Forgiveness is ultimately a gracious work of God that enables a person to move redemptively towards another in spite of being sinned against. God's beauty and grace are found in His commands to love and forgive like Christ, since such precepts are promises that God will perfect His love in the souls of His children as He accomplishes His sanctifying work. The pinnacle of understanding forgiveness is reached when one realizes that Jesus' command to "love your enemy" (Matt 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36) is the very essence of forgiveness.

The theocentric definition of forgiveness, which provides the proper orientation and foundation to develop a united and comprehensive model, was used to address the twelve predominate issues surrounding forgiveness (chapter 3). From the developed theocentric framework, an initial attempt at a Christian psychology of forgiveness was made (chapter 4) by looking at the dynamics of unforgiveness and the process of moving towards forgiveness, taking into consideration the supernatural, eternal realities of God's love at work in and through the redeemed soul. The theocentric understanding of forgiveness based on divine love led to the conclusion that forgiveness from the heart is the result of developing a heart of love. A three-fold model was offered as a means to move from unforgiveness to forgiveness—intimacy with Christ, identity in Christ, culminating in the imitation of Christ. This three-fold approach is applicable not only to one struggling with unforgiveness, but can be applied to all soul struggles that are a part of the journey of progressive sanctification.

## **Manifold Implications**

A right understanding of forgiveness has far-reaching implications in several major areas—clinical research, Christian counseling, the body of Christ, and in the individual life of every follower of Christ. A theocentric understanding of forgiveness provides each of the four areas with the necessary foundation and coherence to explore further the depths of love and forgiveness and to apply the timeless principles to every aspect of life. Before surveying the implications of a theocentric understanding of forgiveness, it is important to consider some of the realities of the redeemed life with regards to love and forgiveness.

### *Realities of the Redeemed Life*

As presented in this work, the call to love and forgive like Christ is a call to holiness, the standard established by God Himself (Lev 19:2; Matt 5:48; Luke 6:36). However, several important issues related to forgiveness and living the Christian life must be stressed. First, the creative, loving work of God begins at regeneration, but the work of redemption is not yet complete. Therefore, Christians struggle daily, even moment by moment, to love God and others as themselves. This ever-real and present battle within the soul takes place even without struggling specifically with issues of unforgiveness. As a result, the sin of unforgiveness should be understood not as an isolated sin, but as part of the ongoing struggle of living the Christian life, and serves as a reminder to work out one's salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that God is at work in the soul, to will and to act according to His good pleasures (Phil 2:12-13). Second, God's conforming work in the soul utilizes the struggles of unforgiveness to bring about increasing intimacy with, identity in, and imitation of Christ. The process of moving (ever so imperfectly) towards forgiveness is a process of progressive sanctification. Third, given God's created design, there is a certain portion of one's reaction to being sinned against that is legitimate—anger against unrighteousness, deeply imbedded desire for justice, and repression to cope with horrific trauma.

However, given the depravity of the heart, good, created capacities are easily perverted and can lead to sinful attitudes and actions. Fourth, on the other end of the spectrum, it is difficult for one to achieve perfect forgiveness because humans are sinners and their lives are tainted by sin. There may be moments of genuinely hurting for the soul of the offender more than the hurt in one's own soul, and there may be authentic times of moving towards the other with Christ-like love, but remnants of sin are mixed with Spirit-enabled works of love. Loving and forgiving like Christ are the absolute standard for God's eternal relational paradigm; however, on this side of heaven, one can only experience or savor a portion of such wondrous works of love. Therefore, any model of forgiveness has to acknowledge and reflect the reality of "grace mingled with corruption" (Sibbes, 1860/1998, p. 18) while not compromising the equally-present reality of God's righteous and eternal relational paradigm of love.

### ***Implications for Clinical Research***

What would it look like for clinical research to be guided by a theocentric understanding of forgiveness? Granted, most models of forgiveness surveyed in this study implicitly resemble a Christian framework; however, in spite of the multitude of empirical studies conducted over the past two decades, there is insufficient research in how an explicitly God-centered approach shapes people's "understanding and experience" of forgiveness (cf. McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000, p. 10). Moreover, care must be taken so that modern psychological language and practice does not undermine the "power" and "practice of the Gospel" (cf. Jones, 1995, p. 39; Pargament & Rye, 1998). The time for a theocentric model of forgiveness derived from God's law of love seems ripe (cf. *Journal of Psychology and Theology's* special issue on "Love of God, Love of Neighbor-as-Self" scheduled for Spring 2006. This issue will focus on the psychological implications of God's two-fold commandment to love). There is certainly a need for an explicitly Christocentric model of forgiveness that

offers all of the resources and truths associated with the eternal, sovereign, holy, and loving God of the Bible.

Empirical research of forgiveness may need to be adjusted or expanded, depending on the degree of differentiation of a model's presuppositions and practical considerations compared to a theocentric model. One of the immediate difficulties in incorporating a theocentric approach in clinical research is determining how the spiritual components can be taken into account—i.e., the work of the Holy Spirit, God's means and timing to bring about a change of heart, and a person's relationship with God. Most of what occurs internally in the Christian soul is not directly measurable and changes are typically incremental and variable. Longitudinal studies seem more appropriate for forgiveness research since the process of forgiveness is a work of sanctification. Despite noted challenges, explicitly theocentric research is imperative in order to fully plot the deep contours of a Christian psychology.

### *Implications for Christian Counseling*

A theocentric understanding of love and forgiveness should play a major role in the Christian counseling paradigm and practice, given the fundamental role that love and forgiveness plays in every relationship. Without such specific God-centered goals, the tendency is to remain focused on presenting problems of the present and past. The counselor must be intentional in helping counselees understand that their lives are being lived out within God's redemptive history.

The goals of counseling should be consistent with God's law of love—to help one to love God and others. A counselor should journey alongside the counselee to understand what life experiences have shaped and hindered one's relational worldview—view of God, self, and others—as expressed through the experiences of intimacy (i.e., relational attachments), identity (i.e., issues of self and others), and imitation (i.e., behaviors and attitudes). In other words, a counselor should make it a

point to understand how a person loves and forgives, what keeps one from doing so, and ways in which one can develop a heart of love, in spite of unloving and even abusive experiences. The beauty of the Gospel is the only light bright enough to pierce the seemingly bottomless pit of despair, the only weapon powerful enough to break the strongholds of sin, and the only salve strong enough to strengthen broken souls.

The Christian counselor should also keep in mind that walking alongside fellow brothers or sisters in Christ who are working towards authentic love and forgiveness from the heart is part of the journey of progressive sanctification—for both the counselee and the counselor. In helping others, a counselor is often confronted with similar struggles to love and forgive and joins with the counselee in the journey towards the city of God. The reality is that only God can bring about redemptive changes in the soul of the counselee and the counselor serves as one of many people God can use as instruments to bring about increased conformity to Christ.

### *Implications for the Body of Christ*

A theocentric perspective of love and forgiveness is God's eternal relational paradigm for His people, for the building up of the body in love, and to serve as an incarnate portrait of God's love and forgiveness. The rich colors, deep hues, and broad strokes of divine love found in the God-centered approach to relationships serve as a picture of God's intended design—a striking contrast to what is typically seen and experienced within Christian circles, especially during the routine of the Sunday morning experience. The theocentric model of love and forgiveness can be used to help fellow brothers and sisters in Christ overcome the deep hurts experienced in the context of marriage and family, the local church, and in the community at large. Unfortunately, the cultural over-emphasis on individual autonomy, ecclesiological under-emphasis of the unity of the body, and the under-developed spiritual virtues of most Christians tend to inhibit the practice of Christ-like love and forgiveness within the body of Christ.

Fortunately, God's Spirit of love is relentless in His creative, conforming, and communing work in the souls of those who make up the members of His body. God's sovereign and efficacious love disposes regenerate hearts to righteous affections towards God and others. Ultimately, His people are able to love and forgive in increasing measures as they journey on the path of progressive sanctification in preparation for the ultimate marriage—between Christ and His church.

### ***Implications for the Christian Life***

The call to love and forgive like Christ is a call to live by faith. Ultimately, developing a firm grasp on the foundational aspects of love and forgiveness is essential in walking in a manner worthy of one's calling in Christ (Eph 4:1). The struggle to love and forgive serves as the grit in which the redeemed soul is polished and purified. The lifelong effort to love others as oneself and to love despite being sinned against, enables every believer to grow more intimate with Christ through the fellowship of His suffering and conformity to His death (cf. Phil 3:10), to find increasing identity in Christ through the realization that one's life is no longer his own but Christ who lives in him (cf. Gal 2:20), and to imitate Christ in increasing measures through a deepening faith cultivated by the love of God (cf. Gal 5:6). The grace-filled reality of the Christian life is one of a hope that never disappoints, knowing that the love of God has been poured out within the redeemed hearts (Rom 5:5), and the God of love relentlessly pursues His children all the days of their lives (Ps 23:6). Consequently, those who grow in awareness and appreciation of their immeasurable forgiveness and love in Christ will, in turn, forgive and love like Christ in increasing measures, empowered by a heart being perfected by divine love.

### **Questions for Further Research**

No single body of work can hope to attend to all of the complexities and the nuances encountered in the journey of life. Nevertheless, a model of forgiveness needs

to offer the resources required for handling the complexities of life and to possess the depth and resiliency necessary to persevere through the most difficult issues associated with relationally-oriented brokenness. Only an explicitly theocentric approach to forgiveness—equipped with the substantial foundation of divine love, oriented by God’s redemptive history and corresponding view of suffering, and purposed to bring increased Christ-likeness and glory to God—is capable of not only surviving the challenges of life, but is able to transcend the temporal and finite experiences of life and ascend the heights of redeeming love. The model presented in this work provides a Godward structure to human forgiveness, but there are a plethora of issues that need to be addressed by further research and reflection.

On the one hand, God created the human soul with beautiful intricacy. On the other hand, God revealed the truths of the Gospel with beautiful simplicity. Fortunately, the supernatural, sovereign spirit of the triune God, who is both Creator and Redeemer, is able to penetrate the labyrinths of the soul and “judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (cf. Heb 4:12). This very real tension, between the complexity of the soul and the powerful simplicity of the Gospel, bears much weight on the issue of authentic love and forgiveness that issue from the heart, and exists only within the realm of finite creation. To neglect this tension can lead to a simple theocentrism (i.e., “God is good, everything else is bad” or “you are either in sin or you are not”) and a false dichotomy between created and non-created beings and their attributes—all natural desires (i.e., for sex, food, happiness) and emotions (i.e., anger, guilt, depression) are bad, whereas all spiritual-related thoughts and emotions are good. Several areas overflow with opportunities to sort through and better understand the tension between the complex, yet straightforward aspects associated with love and forgiveness.

### *Issues of Creation and Development*

A deeper understanding of Christian personhood and identity is required to develop a more nuanced understanding of unforgiveness and forgiveness. God created human beings in His image, with an innate desire for righteousness and justice. For instance, the Psalms provide a scriptural illustration of how the human soul anguishes when tormented by enemies. Therefore, in one sense, a person's natural reaction to injustice and being sinned against is part of God's created design. At what point does anger and a desire for justice become sinful? Should the definition of unforgiveness include, the created, non-sinful response to unrighteousness and injustice or should unforgiveness only refer to a sinful response to being sinned against? Roberts makes a helpful distinction that forgiveness does not do away with the moral judgment of the offense, but does away with the self-righteous emotional perception that the offender is "bad, alien, guilty, worthy of suffering, unwelcome, offensive, an enemy, etc." (2005a, p.7). Another example of taking seriously God's created design is the issue of defense mechanisms. Should a child or woman's disassociation with the painful realities of a past trauma be considered unforgiveness? Is the disassociation a sinful response to being sinned against? Is the caution, fear, or apathy of an abuse victim towards her offender wrong or sinful? These are just a few difficult questions that will need to be addressed in the proposed model of forgiveness.

The empirical research that suggests older people are more apt to forgive than younger people (Krause & Ellison, 2003) highlights the fact that much can, and should be learned by researching the developmental aspects of forgiveness. How does a person's ability to forgive change as he develops and matures with age? How does a person's family of origin and life experiences shape her ability to forgive? Can only those with an intact and fully developed self forgive? Enright's developmental model of forgiveness (Enright & Gassin, 1992; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) illustrates how one might capture the developing heart of love and forgiveness.

### *Issue of Forgiving Self*

A significant number of contributors in the field assert there are times when it is necessary to forgive oneself (Enright, 1996; Enright & North, 1998; Holmgren, 2002; Kendall, 2002; Neu, 2002; North, 1998; Murphy & Hampton, 1988; Murphy, 1997, 2002; Smedes, 1984, 1996; Stanley, 1991; Worthington, 2003). There are compelling arguments for self-forgiveness. Everyone can recall a struggle with lingering guilt or shame over an incident—whether as the victim or as the perpetrator. The consensus in the field is that self-forgiveness is the key to relieving self-blame and self-condemnation, as well as the guilt associated with the wrongful action, and the shame associated with the recognized character flaws. Another rationale is that if one is able to forgive another, then one should be able to forgive oneself (Enright, 1996; Worthington, 2003).

There are number of relevant questions that should be answered to better evaluate self-forgiveness: How does self-forgiveness align with an explicitly theocentric model of forgiveness, as well as with God's law of love? Is self-forgiveness a purely modern psychological concept? What is the correlation between experiencing deep-rooted guilt and shame with the struggle to forgive oneself? Does Allender's assertion (1992)—those who struggle with not feeling forgiven do not fully understand the meaning of being justified by faith—have any merit? If so, what are ways in which one can appropriate a deeper understanding of one's justification by faith in Christ? What are the theological truths which support or undermine the concept of self-forgiveness? How does a counselor discern whether a person struggling with self-forgiveness is merely looking for sympathy and reassurance, thus leading to increased narcissism? Is self-forgiveness the key to countering self-hatred? Is reconciliation linked with self-forgiveness? Can self-forgiveness be considered a part of repentance? These are some significant and relevant questions that any model of forgiveness needs to address, knowing that the concept of self-forgiveness is widely espoused in the current

forgiveness literature.

### *Issues of Timing and the Past*

There are significant questions regarding the issues of timing and working through the past that demand further research within the realm of forgiveness.

Questions associated with timing issues include: How does one handle the tension between the time needed to work with a heart in bondage to painful emotions of the past and the urgency of working with a heart hardened by vengeful rumination? Is righteousness found only in the decision to forgive or is there any righteousness to be found in the struggle itself to forgive? Is there any righteousness found in a state of unforgiveness? Can a person move towards forgiveness too quickly in an attempt to be obedient to God's commands to love and forgive? Does authenticity of forgiveness, or forgiveness from the heart, correlate more with decisional or emotional forgiveness as defined by Worthington (2003)?

Regarding working through the past, is it necessary to "heal" painful memories and emotions of the past in order to forgive? What exactly does working through the past entail? How much of the struggle associated with the past can be directly and indirectly addressed by the process of forgiveness? Specifically in the struggle to forgive, is it necessary for one to envision and experience Christ ministering to one in the past or is it more biblical and advantageous to focus on Christ and His present truths and future promises? Would it be more hurtful or helpful to consider the hurtful things of the past as worthless compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ (cf. Phil 3:8)? What are the inherent pitfalls and inherent treasures in using the three-fold approach to developing a heart of love—a growing intimacy with, identity in, and imitation of Christ—with regard to dealing with the past? What impact does forgiveness have on hurtful memories of the past? Can forgiveness be the liberating key in breaking free from the bondage of past pain? How can a counselor gage when

forgiveness is used merely as an excuse to avoid dealing with the past?

### **A Final Word**

Forgiveness originates and ends with God. Human forgiveness depends on the creative, conforming, and communing love of God. Within redemptive history, God's sanctifying law of love provides not only the eternal relational paradigm for all those who have been adopted by the sovereign Creator and Redeemer, but also gives shape and substance to a theocentric understanding of human forgiveness. The inseparable connection between love and forgiveness provides the essential foundation of a God-centered model of forgiveness, enabling the human soul to overcome and persevere through the trials and tribulations of life. The lifelong journey of love and forgiveness toward the city of God can only be traveled with the One who already walked the path of perfect love and forgiveness—Jesus Christ. A growing ability to forgive requires an ever-developing heart of love, centered upon an ever-growing intimacy with, identity in, and imitation of Christ. The call to love and forgive like Christ is indeed a call to holiness.

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## ABSTRACT

### TOWARDS AN EXPLICITLY THEOCENTRIC MODEL OF FORGIVENESS BASED ON GOD'S TWO-FOLD COMMANDMENT TO LOVE

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This dissertation develops a God-centered understanding of forgiveness based on the context of God's redemptive history and derived from His two great commandments. Chapter 1 surveys the forgiveness literature, points out the divergent views of twelve aspects of forgiveness, and builds a case for the need of an explicitly theocentric model of forgiveness.

Chapter 2 begins with an overview of redemptive history and its implications for understanding forgiveness, and then provides a biblical and theological understanding of divine love. The intimate connection between love and forgiveness is demonstrated from Scripture and explained as a precursor to developing a theocentric definition of forgiveness.

Chapter 3 starts with an overview of the major theological omissions of the prevailing clinical models of forgiveness—the centrality of God, doctrine of sin, and primacy of Jesus Christ. Then, the theocentric definition of forgiveness is used to address and develop the twelve aspects of forgiveness, looking also at the communal aspects of each issue.

Chapter 4 develops a Christian psychology of unforgiveness and forgiveness by examining the dynamics within the soul. A model for moving from unforgiveness to

forgiveness is offered, which focuses on developing a heart of love, and entails a growing intimacy with, identity in, and imitation of Christ.

Chapter 5 offers concluding thoughts and reflections and recaps the theme that runs through the dissertation—the process of moving from unforgiveness to forgiveness is a primary process of sanctification. Implications of a theocentric understanding are briefly discussed for the areas of clinical research, Christian counseling, the body of Christ, and the life of the believer. Finally, significant areas for further research are highlighted.

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