

# God's Repentance-Enabling Forgiveness

BY RALPH C. WOOD

It is the Easter event—the Father's gracious rejection of our dreadful rejection, the Son's awful assumption of the world's entire burden of sin, the Holy Spirit's infusion of forgiveness into our lives—that provides our only hope for repentance. A Flannery O'Connor short story shows this extravagant claim is not mere theological word-play, but a matter of life and death.

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**V**oltaire famously declared, “God forgives because it’s his business.” The great atheist could refer blithely to the God in whom he did not believe because he also had contempt for the chief Christian virtue. Mercy and pity and forgiveness are not the traits of heroic peoples and cultures. The Greeks, for example, sanctioned pity only for the weak and the helpless, never for the strong and the guilty. Thus did Voltaire aim to trivialize forgiveness by turning it into something automatic, making it a matter of rote, thus denying it any real significance. Yet the old skeptic spoke more truly than he knew. In the profound original sense of the word, forgiveness is indeed God’s *business*: his essential occupation, his constant activity, his diligent engagement—indeed, his very nature. Thus it is meant to form our fundamental character as Christians.

## **GOD'S FORGIVENESS PRECEDES REPENTANCE**

The common assumption, found even in the most standard textbooks and dictionaries of theology, is that our forgiveness remains conditional

upon our repentance: first we repent, and then God forgives. The word “repentance” means literally a turning back, a reversal of one’s course. Only when we do a moral and spiritual about-face, according to this understanding, can we expect God’s mercy. Many biblical texts seem to speak this way. Jesus himself declares, in his Model Prayer, that unless we forgive others, we ourselves have no hope of forgiveness. So do the Hebrew prophets warn that elaborate sacrifices will not win mercy from God, unless they are preceded by broken and contrite hearts. “I hate, I despise your festivals,” declares Amos. “Take away from me the noise of your songs.” God desires not such symbolic acts of repentance, the prophet thunders, so much as ethically transformed lives: “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:21).

Yet this way of reading these texts often leads to moralism and atheism. It makes our forgiveness contingent upon our good deeds, as our acts of repentance form a necessary symmetry with God’s mercy. It is not difficult to see how moralism issues in atheism. If our own prior action is the real *sine qua non*, then God is eventually rendered redundant. Yet there is another and drastically opposed way of construing not only these particular texts but the whole biblical tradition as well. It insists upon the paradoxical reversal of the seemingly obvious order: we repent, not in order to *be* forgiven, but because we have already *been* forgiven. The Psalmists, for example, take endless delight in the Law of the Lord; it is God’s gracious and merciful provision for Israel, not a grinding requirement to which she must reluctantly submit. Only because God has already shown Israel his boundless mercy is she called to be his people living in high moral excellence. Amos is angry because his people have not lived out the radical ethical consequences of God’s forgiveness. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer was to complain in the 20<sup>th</sup> century about modern Christians, the ancient Israelites had cheapened God’s abundant grace into an excuse for their own moral laxity.

The New Testament pattern is very much the same. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus approaches the paralytic and tells him, to the great astonishment of all, that his sins are forgiven. The poor man had not sought forgiveness but healing! It seems evident that Jesus is interested in how the paralytic will live, now that his health has been restored—whether he will be satisfied with mere wellness (as we call it) or whether his forgiveness will produce a transformed life of *metanoia*, of true repentance and conversion. So it goes in John’s gospel, with the woman who has been caught in adultery. Jesus tells her that her sins are forgiven, and then he instructs her to go and sin no more. Her new freedom is conditional upon her forgiveness, therefore, not upon her repentance. Jesus has set her free for

an endlessly penitent life—not only asking forgiveness for her past sins, but also for the sins that she shall surely commit (even if ever so much more reluctantly) in the future. The supreme example of this priority which forgiveness holds over repentance is found in Christ’s own words from the cross. He asks God to forgive those who are crucifying him, not because they have repented and begged his mercy, but because he wants to

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break the chain of vengeance that has entrapped them. If he curses them, by contrast, then the vicious cycle of unrepentance will remain forever closed.

Luther and Calvin were so convinced about the rightness of this

paradoxical forgiveness-enabling-repentance sequence that they employed extravagant metaphors to emphasize it. When confronted by fierce temptation, for example, Luther seized a piece of chalk and scrawled out the words *Baptizatus sum* (“I have been baptized”). That he had been baptized made him the property of the God who had already done penitence for him. It meant that alien and demonic powers could not overtake him, try as they might. Luther also insisted that sin consists not in adultery or theft or even murder, but rather in unbelief—in the refusal to entrust our lives wholly to the God who has entrusted himself to us. Yet it is exceedingly hard, Luther added, to discover this most fundamental of all facts. We cannot learn the true meaning of sin by beholding horrible instances of evil—for example, in our own era, by looking at Auschwitz or Rwanda or Hiroshima or My Lai. These are the consequences of sin, but not sin itself. Sin is truly discerned, said Luther, only at a single place: at Golgotha. The humiliation and crucifixion of Jesus is the one sin that measures all other sins, the sin that reveals the full and total desperation of human existence.

Yet it is precisely the Easter event—the Father’s gracious rejection of our dreadful rejection, the Son’s awful assumption of the world’s entire burden of sin, the Holy Spirit’s infusion of forgiveness into our very lives—that provides our only hope for an utter about-face, for total transformation, for conversion and repentance. Calvin declared, along these same lines, that we utterly misread the gospels if we misconstrue their report about how Jesus and John the Baptist called people to repentance because the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. The real theological order is exactly the reverse. Because the Kingdom of

forgiveness was *already* at hand, said Calvin, they *therefore* summoned everyone to repentance. The Gospel would not be Cheering News but Ill Tidings indeed if it were anything other than God's gracious and unmerited and repentance-inducing forgiveness.

Among all modern theologians, surely it is Karl Barth who has most clearly emphasized the radically asymmetrical relation of forgiveness and repentance. Whether apocryphal or not, there is a splendid Barthian story that illustrates the point. It is reported that Barth was once asked what he would say to Hitler if he ever had the chance to meet the monstrous man who was destroying Europe and who would ruin the whole world if he were not stopped. Barth's interlocutor assumed that he would offer a scorching prophetic judgment against the miscreant's awful politics of destruction. Barth replied, instead, that he would do nothing other than quote Romans 5:8 to Hitler: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Only such unparalleled mercy and forgiveness, such unstinted Gladness, could have prompted the Führer's genuine repentance. To accuse him, though justly, of his dreadful sins would have prompted Hitler's self-righteous defense, his angry justification of his "necessary" deeds.

Here we see the precise relation of God's anger and mercy. William Law, the English devotional writer of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, put their order exactly right: "God gets angry only if we will not be happy." Rather than negating his justice, God's love intensifies it. Divine wrath, as Barth repeatedly insists, is made all the more furious for resting on divine mercy. We know the terrible extent of our sin exactly and precisely to the terrible extent of God's forgiveness. Hence Barth's insistence on the stunning paradoxes of the Gospel. God imprisons us, says Barth, by flinging wide our cell door. God's judgment "accuses [man] by showing him that all the charges against him have been dropped. It threatens him by showing him that he is out of danger."

#### **FLANNERY O'CONNOR ON GRACIOUS FORGIVENESS**

These extravagant claims are not matters of mere theological word-play. That they are matters of life and death is borne out in Flannery O'Connor's short story entitled "The Artificial Nigger." There an old man named Mr. Head and his grandson Nelson are living in a remote rural section of northeast Georgia. They are so isolated from any larger community that they should live in blessed dependence on each other. Instead, both man and boy are consumed by an enormous willfulness, each proudly determined to dominate the other. Though these two rustics have never heard of Friedrich Nietzsche, their ruthless will-to-power—their desire of each to subject the other to his own desire—lies at the heart of modern nihilism. It is also the essence of the unbelief that Luther saw as

lying at the core of Original Sin.

Mr. Head decides to take young Nelson to the city in order to destroy any longing to leave the farm, making him want instead to remain at home and perhaps to care for him in his old age. The city is an alien and forbidding place, Mr. Head is determined to show him, full of “niggers” as well as other unsavory figures and scenes. As Mr. Head delights in reminding Nelson, he has never even *seen* a “nigger.” No sooner have they boarded the train bound for the city than a large coffee-colored Negro strides majestically past them. One hand resting on his ample stomach, the black man uses the other to lift and lower his cane in a slow, kingly gait. With his neat mustache and his yellow satin tie, his ruby stickpin and sapphire ring, this elderly Negro exhibits all the signs of prosperity. Yet in the still-segregated South, he is not free to live according to his means; he is required, instead, to sit in the colored-only carriage at the rear of the train. Despite the injustice done to him, the Negro retains an air of serene dignity and grace.

Once the man has walked past them, Mr. Head asks Nelson what he has seen, knowing that the boy has never before encountered a Negro. “A man,” Nelson truthfully replies. “What kind of man?” his grandfather asks again. “A fat man,” Nelson answers, and then more cautiously, “An old man.” “That was a nigger,” Mr. Head gleefully declares, humiliating Nelson in his ignorance that the skin-color of Negroes can be tan as well as black. Nelson is at first infuriated at his grandfather for this heartless trick, but then he turns his rage against the black man himself—blaming him for the racial hatred he has just learned.

O'Connor’s story shows that bigotry is not native but acquired, for Nelson has had to learn how to hate this black man who had meant him no harm. But the story cuts far deeper than well-worn truths about the universal human family learning to accept each other’s epidermal differences. The story is concerned primarily with reconciliation and forgiveness, as becomes evident in the following scene. Lost in the maze of the city’s streets, Nelson and Mr. Head stumble into a black ghetto. The boy asks for help from a large Negro woman leaning idly in a doorway. It is not physical direction alone that the frightened child desires. He wants a far profounder kind of succor and guidance. And so he finds himself wishing that this giant Negress would draw him to her huge bosom, hold him tight in her arms, breathe warmly on his face, while he looked “down and down into her eyes.” Though the adolescent Nelson’s longings are vaguely sexual, his far deeper feelings are religious. He wants to collapse in supplication before this black Madonna. Yet he dare not confess to his grandfather such desire to surrender his proud independence. Their contest of wills is far too fulfilling for them to discern in this black woman

a feminine image of their redemption.

In a final act of perfidy, Mr. Head decides to humiliate Nelson into total, abject dependence by hiding behind a trash bin after the exhausted boy has fallen asleep on a sidewalk. He knows that when Nelson rouses he will eagerly, even desperately seek his grandfather's solace. Instead, the newly awakened child, running wildly in his terror, knocks down a woman who is carrying a bag of groceries. She in turn threatens legal action and screams for the police, just as Mr. Head rushes to the scene. In clear repetition of Peter's denial of Jesus, and in declaration of his own self-interest, the old man thrice disavows any knowledge of the boy. Nelson is devastated: this is treachery beyond all bounds. Yet no sooner has Mr. Head committed his awful deed of denial than he recognizes the horror of it. He all but begs for the boy's forgiveness. If Nelson would only grant it, they could at last meet on the common ground of their confessed need. Instead, the child refuses to pardon the old man, knowing that he now has acquired the ultimate power over him. Thus does the sin of duplicity and betrayal occasion a far worse evil: the refusal of forgiveness. From having been horrified at the sin his grandfather had committed against him, Nelson now luxuriates in it. His "mind had frozen around his grandfather's treachery as if he were trying to preserve it intact to present it at the final judgment."

Flannery O'Connor has taken her readers into the very abyss of evil, making us ask how such a tangled knot of recrimination and self-justification could possibly

be cut. It happens when, lost yet again in the city, grandson and grandfather wander into a white suburb. There they discover an artificial Negro in front of an elegant home. This degrading image of black servitude is supposed to be a smiling and carefree "darker". But he has a

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chipped eye, he lurches forward at an awkward angle, and the watermelon he is supposed to be eating has turned brown. "It was not possible," declares the narrator, "to tell whether the artificial Negro were meant to be young or old; he looked too miserable to be either." It is extremely unlikely that Nelson and Mr. Head have ever seen a crucifix, but they would probably know the gospel song entitled "The Old Rugged Cross".

And so they find themselves strangely transfixed by this “emblem of suffering and shame”. A racist image meant to signal white mastery over black people, it has unintentionally become a sign of anguish patiently and graciously borne. Before it, the mutual sins of the young boy and the old man begin mysteriously to melt away. “They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy.”

O’Connor gets the order of redemption exactly right. Nelson and Mr. Head have discovered something far deeper than the means for overcoming the evident evils of racial hatred and discrimination. They have found something immensely greater: the forgiveness that is the single solvent for all evils. Thus will they be able to repent of their sins and to forgive each other only because they have themselves first of all been forgiven. They were locked in a battle of wills that could never have been broken by any self-prompted act of relinquishment, until they encountered God’s sin-breaking forgiveness in Christ. Restored to right relation with God, they are on the way also to right relation with each other. “When we forgive someone,” declares Michael Jenkins, “we are saying that we stand side by side with them as sinners under the mandate of the God who forgives all.” Karl Barth saw this truth with his usual acuity when he declared that God’s mercy is the one cause for both our daily rising up and our final lying down. “Every day we ought to begin, we may begin with the confession: ‘I believe in the forgiveness of sins.’ In the brief hour of our death we shall still have nothing else to say.”

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**RALPH C. WOOD**

*is University Professor of Theology and Literature at Baylor University*