

Hearing and Speaking Freedom:  
On the Significance of Communicating Forgiveness in  
Christianity's Quest for Human Rights

Paul E. Lutter  
Luther Seminary  
St. Paul, MN

*THAT* THERE EXISTS AN INTENTIONAL CONNECTION BEING WORKED OUT BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS ACROSS THE SPECTRUM of political, sociological, and psychological scenes on all levels around the world is easily evidenced—not least by the increasing quantity and quality of books published over the past few years that bring these two significant themes into conversation in the particularities of certain contexts where *human rights* and *forgiveness* are both desperately needed. The question in these situations is often about the appropriateness of confession and forgiveness between those who have wronged and been wronged, why such confession and forgiveness is necessary, or even whether or not forgiveness and the attending matters of reconciliation and restorative justice are the appropriate categories for what needs to happen between the wrong-doer and the wronged. These are pressing matters that deserve our attention, and we ought not to let these questions go too quickly.

It is in the context of asking about the interconnected nature of forgiveness and human rights in situations that evidence neither that I wish to address from a theological perspective this question: how do we forgive (or receive forgiveness) when we cannot or do not wish to do so? My argument is that by focusing on the victim or the victimizer (or both) or the action/inaction that created a breach in the relationship between the two, forgiveness becomes dependent upon one of two things: the magnitude of the sin and/or whether or not each party has it within them to do what is right: either confess their sin

and repent, or offer forgiveness. While it is true that at some point the conversation needs to turn to the relationship between the wronged and the wrong-doer, this is not where the focus lies if the forgiveness we are talking about is particularly *Christian*. This paper is meant to be a contribution to what Christianity might offer the discussion of the relationship present between forgiveness and human rights.

### I. What is Forgiveness?

When I use the term “forgiveness” in this paper, I have a particular definition in mind, modified from Martin Luther’s understanding of Christian freedom. Luther describes freedom in a two-fold way: “A Christian is perfectly free lord of all subject to none. A Christian is dutiful servant to all, subject to all.” While Lutherans will quickly pick up on the former portion of the dialectic (a Christian is free lord of all subject to none—or freedom *from*) they are less certain to also express the latter (a Christian is dutiful servant to all, subject to all—or freedom *for*). The fear of identifying the latter form of freedom is wrapped in an on-going debate about the role of the law after Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. Lutherans will commonly identify two uses of the law: the first is the civil, in which the society is ordered and cared for; the second is the theological, pointing out and convicting us of our sin, driving us to the foot of the cross and thus to the death of the sinful self. While Lutherans will uniformly agree concerning these uses, it is the so-called “third use of the law” that is problematic. Those who contend that this use exists do so on the basis of this question: “Now that Christ has died for me/us, how will I respond to what he’s done?” On the one side of the debate are those who argue that Christ is the end of the law, that is, its demands on us have come to a dead end so to speak. Luther will say in his “Heidelberg Disputation” of 1518 that “The law

says ‘do this’ and it is never done.’” On the other side of the debate concerning the law is the argument that the new freedom in Christ has to come to some visible expression or response; else that new freedom has not taken hold. The argument that issues forth when these two sides face one another is the question of how this new freedom in Christ is expressed in the Christian life, if it needs to at all.

Given the above discussion, I want to suggest that the third use of the law in Luther’s theology does not exist precisely because the freedom we are given we are given in and by Christ, and that this kind of freedom is not something to be responded to but heard and spoken. We are now ready to consider what we mean when we speak of forgiveness. Forgiveness is freedom *from* and freedom *for*.

## II. Forgiveness as Freedom *From*

In the sixteenth century, Luther would want to talk about freedom *from* “sin, death, and the power of the Devil,” which he called “the unholy trinity.” He would variably also include and interchange terms like “the flesh” and “the world” identifying his background as a monk and priest in a medieval Catholic church. In the twenty-first century, the “unholy trinity” yet exists, but its may now be identified as “me, myself, and I,” understanding that such an all encompassing fascination with ourselves, our lives, our well-being and security naturally excludes interest in and care for the neighbor, not only individually but also other in the form of communities, countries, religious traditions, and so on. The dubious nature of this form of trinity will become further apparent below in the discussion of sin and forgiveness. In brief, such a centrality on the self suggests a self-autonomy that does not allow for the equality of the self with the neighbor in the sins one enacts against the other or in the attendant process of forgiveness.

### III. Forgiveness as Freedom *For*

For what purpose does Christ set us free by forgiving us through his death and resurrection? Luther will remark in his *Small Catechism* “Where there is forgiveness of sin, there is life and salvation.” While Christians are quick to jump over “life” to the benefit of “salvation” itself, it is worthwhile to think about what forgiveness as freedom for effects in life that is not an ideological utopia but rather real life with all of its complexity and messiness lived in imperfect relationships in a broken world hungering for such freedom that forgiveness offers and finally gives.

When God gives life, he gives it not in isolation of anything else, but rather bound to relationship. “It is not good for man to be alone” (Gen 2) gives voice to the reality of the human as equally, though differently constituted, dependent on creaturely as well as divine connection. In this life, God gives many relationships, many stations as Luther liked to call them. These stations are for the care of the neighbor and praising God. One praises God by freely using their God-given gifts in service and care of the neighbor. One uses their gifts in the relationships they have been given by asking the question “What are we going to do now that we do not have to do anything at all?” That is, a freedom *for* seeks to live itself out by living in the nexus between our gifts and the needs of the neighbor, in a spontaneity that is not tied to a demand.

Further, such a life is lived not with the notion that its final destiny is perfection, but in the courage to not be perfect in the here and now. When forgiveness is freedom for, it allows those who are so engaged not to be “so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good” but just the opposite: because the Christian is forgiven and thus freed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—thus assuring salvation—they are now free to

focus their attentions outward (*extra nos*) beyond themselves and toward the world that God loves. (John 3.16) The reason behind this is an understanding that the Christian's life is neither something they have earned or deserved, nor is it their own.

#### IV. Sin

In this discussion of what we are freed *from* and *for* and understanding that from which we are free on account of Jesus Christ to be the unholy trinity of “me, myself, and I”, we need to pause and ask what do we mean by *sin*? Is it, as has been argued by prominent contemporary theologians Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann in separate studies that the existential question faced by Christians today is not Luther's, namely, “Where do I find a gracious God?” That is, is it possible that Christians—among others—no longer have guilty consciences for “what we have done and left undone”? What has become of our sins?

Sin is alive and well! In its present form it is the condition of being so wrapped up in the project of the self, both in an individual and corporate sense, that we cannot see ourselves clear to care for those who are not us. It is, indeed, the need to create the distinction between us and them. While it is most noticeably lived out as violence, terror, abuse, oppression and the like, its hallmark is apathy. Apathy places us at the center with the notion that we are free to judge whether or not we care about that which is not us on the basis of whether caring about what is not us will do something for us. The question apathy asks is “What's in it *for me*?” It is this modernist relevance-centered worldview that believes all things are subject to the ultimate concern, though here the “ultimate concern” is not the God who raised Jesus from the dead for us but rather our becoming

self-autonomous, or in theological parlance, our own god. A “god”, as Luther was fond of saying, was whatever one runs to in times of need.

A word needs to be said about distinguishing between “sin” and “sins.” “Sins” are acts of omission and commission against both God and neighbor. They come in the forms of what we say, what we think, and what we do. Sins and their consequences are put on a scale: this sin is graver than that one, so the punishment received will fit the deed. Whether or not sins are executed is absolutely dependent upon the strength of character and will of the (potential) wrong-doer. As a result, some are more (or less) sinful than others. And those who are in the position of forgiving depend upon their wounded disposition to determine whether or not forgiveness is warranted or deserved.

Sin, on the other hand, is a terminal condition from birth to the grave from which no one is immune or can rise above by doing what is in them. Because it is a condition and not an activity, it informs and touches every single aspect of our lives. We are finally wholly sinners (*totus peccator*) and not partially so based on how many and of what type of sins we have committed and the frailty of our will or resolve. One is in the condition of sin precisely because of who they are in themselves. The result is that we are *all* sinners. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” the Apostle Paul writes in Rom 3. Confession and forgiveness between sinners is finally based not on our disposition, the level of our being wounded, or the degree to which we have repented or sought to make repair for what we have done. Confession and forgiveness is based on a shared condition: sinners are in need of the forgiveness and mercy of God first and one another second. It is to these forms of forgiveness in turn that we necessarily briefly explore.

## V. Forgiveness (es)

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer. In the middle of this prayer is the petition "Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us." While an initial reading of this petition may suggest that forgiveness between God and sinner is conditional ("as we forgive"), I want to suggest that this is not the case based on the resultant view that God is not capable of fully forgiving us. Instead, I want to read this petition as "Forgive us our sin *so that* we can forgive those who sin against us." In this reading, the forgiveness of God from our sin sets us free to forgive the sins of fellow sinners. What are the marks of God's forgiveness of us in Jesus Christ?

God's forgiveness is *declared*. It is the precondition that makes possible our confession and/or forgiveness before God and one another. It comes from outside of us (*extra nos*). . The declaration of forgiveness from God in Christ through the office of preaching (Rom 10.17) which is raised up to make sure the gospel is finally heard. Forgiveness that comes from God is not blindly declared—it knows the fullness of our sinful condition and stares it in the face, speaking a new reality about us. When God's forgiveness is declared to us, it changes who we are: we are now simultaneously fully sinner and forgiven sinner.

God's forgiveness is *free*. Unlike the conditionality created in human relationships, God's forgiveness of us in Jesus Christ does not come with strings attached. Just as it fully knows the depth of breadth of our sinful condition, it knows full well that there is nothing we could even begin to do to repay God for the kind of freedom such forgiveness creates.

God's forgiveness is *undeserved*. This is perhaps the sticking point for a self that is wrapped up in "me, myself, and I" because the self (in its old state) really believes that

such a focus on the self will ultimately result in deserving whatever it wants. So, if the self wants forgiveness, God ought to give it to them based on its self-righteousness. This, however, is completely antithetical to the nature of God's kind of forgiveness. For, when God declares his free forgiveness of us in Jesus Christ, the sinful state in which we believe we really deserve on our own merits what only God can give is exposed and finally expunged. The death of this sinful self through the free, unmerited word of forgiveness declared by God in Jesus Christ opens the way for a new self to emerge, again by God's free, undeserved declaration for us in Jesus Christ, and it is in this new self that the possibility for confession and forgiveness—and thus a whole new reality—is created.

It is only in this wider context of God's forgiveness of us in Jesus Christ that we can then consider what our confession toward and forgiveness of one another can thus be discussed, since God's forgiveness shapes our own. However, what makes our form of forgiveness distinct from God's in Jesus Christ is that ours is necessarily conditional. The reason for this conditionality is that Christians, as sinners and forgiven sinners at the same time, are not able to do anything else. The freedom Christ's forgiveness allows the Christian community is for the work of restorative justice and reconciliation between the wronged and the wrong-doer, whoever this might be.

The difference Christ's forgiveness makes for the Christian community in its work of confession and forgiveness is that it no longer centrally focuses on who did what to whom or the degree to which one wronged or was wronged against. The reason is that the Christian community, marked with the forgiveness that comes only from God in Jesus Christ, sees one another—and those by whom they have been wronged or committed

wrong against—as fellow fully sinners and fully forgiven sinners at the same time, persons who are in themselves completely unrighteous and in Christ fully righteous simultaneously. *That* Christians hurt others and are hurt by others is a given based on the shared reality in which they live, work, and have their being. *That* there need be confession, repentance, and forgiveness between those who are fellow sinners and forgiven sinners at the same time is a given. The question is from where will the Christian community find the strength and ability to confess their sins, repent of them, and receive the forgiveness that will set them free from the power of “me, myself, and I” and free for real lives lived in relationship with others, including those who do not hold central what they themselves do? Where will they find the strength to forgive those who have wronged them, committing themselves to the difficult work of reconciliation and restorative justice? How will they find the strength to tell the truth about which they are cracks and all?

The answer to these questions for the Christian community is Jesus Christ. The focus of this model of forgiveness cannot be on the sinner, the sinned against, or even the sin, for to do so would make it impossible to even conceive of how to go about the process of forgiveness. Jesus Christ gives freedom to the Christian community from “me, myself, and I” and for lives lived in relationship with one another and those whose confession is different than their own. In his declaration of forgiveness, Jesus Christ sets the Christian community free for confessing their sin to those whom they have wronged, repent of what they have done, and ask forgiveness of those with whom they live, work, and have their being. Conversely, when it is the Christian community that is wronged against, they are free to work with others to forgive their sins. The process by which this

occurs—to first *hear* forgiveness as the fullness of freedom (whether Christians want to or not!) and then *speak* freedom to those who have committed a wrong against them or who are wanting to hear the Christian community confess culpability for their actions—is perhaps the gift that Christianity brings to the table regarding how to think about the relationship between Christianity and human rights. In the final section of the paper, this process will be described.

#### VI. On *Hearing* and *Speaking* Freedom

Whether the Christian community realizes it or not, they are ever poised to hear the declaration of God’s forgiveness of them in Jesus Christ. This declaration is spoken over and over again, constantly so that they *hear* it truly, to the Christian community, setting them free from the corporate “me, myself, and I” that can accompany a body of persons who hold a confession to be central. Such a declaration leaves no room for the community to be in denial of who they are (fully sinner) and what it has done (sinned) again and again against members of its own community and members of other communities. Exposed for both who they are and what they’ve done, a new reality and identity is created for them on account of Jesus Christ: they are now fully sinner and fully forgiven simultaneously. This new identity that has sounded in their ear helps them to realize, also, that when others have sinned against them it is a function of who the others are as well: *fellow* sinners and forgiven sinners simultaneously.

Out of this precondition of the full forgiveness of God on the Christian community, they are free for the work of confession and forgiveness. That is, they are free to speak both confession and forgiveness to those whom they have wronged or been wronged by. Such confession and forgiveness is not based on who the wronged or

wronged against are or what they have done, for to do so, as been amply said, makes confession and absolution impossible. Instead, such opportunity is created by the one whose name they bear: Jesus Christ. Indeed, it allows them to be more fully engaged in the process of reconciliation and restorative justice because it does not deny the fullness of who they—or anyone else—are, but rather sees it fully and speaks out of that reality.

How, then, does this help Christianity in its quest for human rights? By being free to tell the truth about who they are on account of Jesus Christ's declaration of forgiveness of them, they are free from focusing on themselves and their need to be the center of life itself. In turn, they are free for serving and caring for the neighbor both from what it has heard from Jesus Christ and what it is now free to speak: its confession of how it has wronged others, its repentance for its misdeeds, and its forgiveness of others who have wronged them. In brief, one of Christianity's gifts to offer the wider community at work in the quest for human rights is its focus on Jesus Christ as freedom that hears the truth about itself and others and out of that speaks a word of freedom for the world God loves.