

Biblical Models for the Practice of Forgiveness in Public Life

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Abstract:

The aim of this article is that to remind the fact that forgiveness is not a practice that should be held captive for the religious life of a person or human community. Rather, it should be a practice of the public life of a society. Yet, there are biblical models for such a practice of forgiveness, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Therefore, for the biblical model embodied by the prophet Jeremiah, the article will continue with the biblical model embodied by John the Baptist. The two are prominent figures in the Bible, one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. The third model is that embodied by Jesus Christ, the central person in the New Testament. From the exploration of the three models, the paper will continue with the coordinates of Church's participation in Christ's model. It will end with the way the practice of forgiveness is reflected in Romanian society and politics after 1989.

Keywords: forgiveness, practice, public life, biblical model, participation

Introduction

For too long, forgiveness has been in the so-called, "religious captivity" (Shriver Jr., 1998: 23), meaning that forgiveness is only a church business. Yet, if the world is the world of God (Bonhoeffer, 1962: 70), then something as forgiveness, has to exist and operate in society and in public life. In fact, forgiveness is embedded in all human activities, whether we are able to see that or not (McFadyen, 2001: 7). In everyday life, people are living by forgiveness in their relationship with God, with themselves and with others.

Donald W. Shriver Jr. analyzing Rodney King's speech about politics highlights that "politics is how humans 'get along' with each other in spite of their conflicts". If this is so, "forgiveness in a political context, is an act that joins moral truth, forbearance, empathy, and commitment to repair a fractured human relation" (Shriver Jr., 1998: 14, 22). Unfortunately, the Church who should have been the first agent to bring forgiveness in public life, failed to do that and kept the practice of

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forgiveness inside the church. We will see that one of the main reasons for this is the church's misunderstanding of forgiveness. Accordingly, a proper understanding of forgiveness opens the door for the outpouring of forgiveness in society, in the world, and in public life.

The purpose of this paper is to explore a few aspects of forgiveness in public life. Starting from concrete biblical examples, I will argue that forgiveness as understood by biblical writers is not purely an individual, religious, spiritual or theological concept. Rather it is a complex concept, encompassing also aspects of public life in society. On this basis then I will point out some concrete contemporary aspects of forgiveness in public life.

The Misunderstanding of Forgiveness in the Church

As I mentioned above, one of the main reasons for the ecclesiastical captivity of the Church is its misunderstanding of forgiveness. The first possible mistake of the Church in this concern, is the excessive verticalization of forgiveness, in which case forgiveness is considered only something between one person and God, an act of dealing with personal sins in front of God. One of the consequences of this view is that forgiveness is considered only a religious, individual, and private business (Muller-Fahrenheit, 1996: 9, 12). Nevertheless, forgiveness is God's gift for the relationships of humans with Himself (Jones, 2001: 51), but forgiveness in the relationship with God is only a face of the coin. This is clear in the Gospels where forgiveness of God is clearly connected (or even conditioned!) with the forgiveness in relationships with each other (Matthew 6: 14–15, Mark 11: 25–26). The danger with the excessive verticalisation of forgiveness is that it promotes a dichotomy in thinking of the reality as being composed by two spheres (Bonhoeffer 1962: 62–72), and also leads to the consideration of sin as an offense only against God, ignoring “its effect and impact in the social and natural realms” (Muller-Fahrenheit, 1996: 12).

The second possible mistake of the Church is the excessive horizontalisation of forgiveness, in which case God cannot forgive a sin committed against somebody else. The danger is that if the vertical dimension of forgiveness is missing sin becomes something banal, or even disappears. (Muller-Fahrenheit, 1996: 13). Another danger is the reduction of forgiveness to the relationship between the offender and the specific victim. An illustration in this sense is the book, *The Sunflower*, written by Simon Wiesenthal. The author tells the story of what happened during his imprisonment in a Nazi camp. He was asked to visit a Nazi soldier who wanted to confess in front of a Jew, the crimes he did against Jews. Eventually, after the confession the author of the

book left without offering the forgiveness to the dying Nazi soldier. This happening is the start of a very interesting dialogue, first with his colleagues in the camp, and after his liberation with a number of various people from different domains of activity. The question in discussion is whether he could or should forgive on behalf of the victims. The answers are different, and some of them are arguing that even God cannot forgive on behalf of the victims (Wiesenthal, 1970: 9–99). Behind this position it seems to be the consideration of forgiveness only in its horizontal dimension, concerning only the relationship between offender and the specific victims. In her essay, *May God Forgive?* Karin Scheiber argues that because of His active love towards humankind, God can forgive:

When we think of God as turned towards humans in whole and undivided love and think of humans as meant to be in a loving communion with God, then God is directly concerned by a human offence against other human and thus in the position to grant forgiveness (Scheiber, 2001: 180).

The two dimensions of forgiveness, the vertical dimension and the horizontal dimension are interrelated. The divorce of the two dimensions leads to an unhealthy forgiveness, for individual and for the community. A good illustration of this kind of unhealthy forgiveness is that offered by David to his son Absalom. The biblical story speaks about a deed of Absalom namely, premeditated crime, that according with the law had only one outcome, death penalty (2 Samuel 13–14). Yet, David, abusing his position as the king, offered forgiveness breaking the law, and without any signs of repentance or remorse from Absalom. All these were followed by instability in the entire country and led to civil war (2 Samuel 15–17), and eventually to the death of Absalom (2 Samuel 18).

The third possible mistake of the Church is to regard forgiveness as being a spiritual or religious obligation. In her essay, *Forgiving Abusive Parents, Psychological and Theological Considerations*, Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger writes: “Making forgiveness a demand can itself be a form of violence” (Hunsinger, 2001: 91). There are many cases in which to demand forgiveness until the process of healing starts is not only inappropriate but also it jeopardizes the process of recovering itself. In an article published by *Washington Jewish Week* in June 23 1995, Lynda Beyer, relates the way Cloe Madanes, a family therapist argues that in cases of incest or other sexual abuses “repentance and reparation must precede forgiveness and psychological healing”. Madanes promotes a strategy based on the Yom Kippur ritual “that emphasizes *slichah* (pardon), *tshuvah* (return from sin) and *tzedakah* (charity to compensate for wrong-doing)” (Bayer, 1995). This is a demonstration of the fact that

to concentrate the attention to the sinner only and to forget the victim, or to impose the obligativity of forgiveness can be dangerous for the victim or even for the community as a whole (Muller-Fahrenheit, 1996: 26). On the other hand, the aim of all efforts has to be the meeting in forgiveness of the offender and the victim. I argued so far that the misunderstanding of forgiveness in the Church is one of the most important reasons for the ecclesiastical captivity of forgiveness. I pointed out three possible mistakes of the church regarding forgiveness, namely, the excessive verticalisation of forgiveness, the excessive horizontalisation of forgiveness and the imposition of obligativity of forgiveness by focusing the attention on the sinner rather than on the victim. A proper understanding of forgiveness requires the fact that the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of forgiveness are bounded together (Constantineanu, 2013: 74), and that in order to deal correctly with the process of forgiveness the focus has to be on victim not on only on the sinner. Also, I argued that there is a need for psychological and spiritual sensitivity in the mediation of forgiveness between the offender and the victim.

Biblical Models for the Practice of Forgiveness in Public Life

In this section I would like to argue how forgiveness can be a reality in the Church and also in public life. The way of doing that is by looking in the Bible, as the normative book for Christian life and for the Church life. I will look first in the Old Testament, and specifically in the book of Jeremiah (chapter 38), and then in the New Testament, at John the Baptist (in Luke chapter 3). The final illustration of forgiveness will be Jesus Christ as the revelation, embodiment and model of forgiveness, for the Church and for society.

The first model for the practice of forgiveness in public life is the work of the prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament. For the argument of this paper we will focus on the story from the book of Jeremiah chapter 38. The context is the very critical and desperate political situation in the country, under the kingship of Zedekiah:

The great facts of Judah's political situation are the massive powers of Egypt in the south and Babylon in the north. Those two powers are in deep conflict and the king in Jerusalem sits helplessly in the middle of the conflict (Brueggemann, 1991: 138).

The king made a very great political mistake by trying to be the ally of Egypt in this conflict (Thomson, 1962: 551), while probably, the neutrality would have been the best option. The king is kept between the desire of his collaborators to fight and the very clear word of God through Jeremiah: surrounding to Babylonian king is the only option

(Lundrom, 1992: 720). Jeremiah is the prophet of God, announcing the inevitability of the Babylonian captivity as a punishment for the unfaithfulness of his people, after so many occasions in which God called them back in a relationship based on faithfulness (Keown, 1995: 226). While the royal house is looking at the human possibilities to escape the catastrophic political situation, there is only Jeremiah who is looking “with hope beyond the political and religious catastrophe” (Myers 1987: 565). For his political-religious position, so different from the opinions of the other religious and political leaders, Jeremiah lost his freedom being in a danger to lose his life (Jeremiah 37–38: 1–6). But in this context, Jeremiah, the prophet, has a secret discussion with Zedekiah, the king (Jeremiah 38: 14–28), in which Jeremiah is asked by Zedekiah to share God’s perspective about the situation. It is one of the important occasions in which Jeremiah shows a great sensitivity to Zedekiah, and devotion to God’s plan of restoration. Jeremiah knew that God’s wrath will be replaced after seventy years of exile, by His forgiveness (Wright 1996: 1996), and now he offers to Zedekiah the possibility to benefit from this by surrounding (Jeremiah 38: 17–23).

It is an amazing proposal of forgiveness from Jeremiah to Zedekiah, even if the absence of God is so clear now in the life of Zedekiah and his people. Jeremiah is the representative of God for Zedekiah, making his future possible in “the absence of God” (Solle, 1967: 21, 47). Why could he do that? The reason is that Jeremiah knew the character of God (Jeremiah 31: 34) In this text the forgiveness of God is promised in the middle of the most immoral and unfaithful generation of the people of God. However, because of this unfaithfulness punishment and a call to return under the covenant of God (Jeremiah 31: 27–33) have to come first. Jeremiah was also a priest (Jeremiah 1:1) but one who rightly understood that the mediation between God and men means sometimes representation (Solle, 1967: 68–70). This representation is a twofold representation. A representation of his people in front of God (Jeremiah 14: 7–9), and a representation of God in front of his people, even when God is “on leave” (Wiesenthal, 1970: 13). Later on from the time of Jeremiah, what was only a shadow in Jeremiah’s time will be fulfilled and completed in Christ, as representative of humankind. We will discuss this in the last part of this section.

The sensitivity of Jeremiah and his willingness to persuade Zedekiah to accept the will of God in their present situation could be interpreted as a sign of reconciliation between the two. Who knows, if the forgiveness of Zedekiah would not have been a possibility? What we do know is that at that moment he was too afraid to follow what he

accepted to be the truth from God, namely, the unconditional surrounding in order to survive (Cawley, 1970: 649). There was a precedent in the history of the royal house, the case of Manasseh, who was the king because of whom, the end in exile of Zedekiah's people could not be stopped in any way (2 Kings 21: 1–18). Even if Jeremiah tried in his intercession to persuade God (Jeremiah 14 and 15), the answer of God is clear (Jeremiah 15: 1–4). Surprisingly, Manasseh did repent in front of God, and he was forgiven (2 Chronicles 33: 12–13). Zedekiah could do the same. We do not know what happened at the personal level with Zedekiah. What we do know is that before his eyes were put out, he has seen how his children were slaughtered (Jeremiah 39: 6–7). What happened in his life after this moment is not told to us, but because of Jeremiah's intervention, who knows? We have seen that in the Old Testament the message and the challenge of forgiveness and reconciliation are there, even in desperate situation in which because of the hardness of his people, God seems to be "on leave". In the Old Testament, the elements of forgiveness were present and were a reality not only in the religious realm, in the Tabernacle or the Temple, but also in the socio-political realm, in the Royal house, even in very difficult or desperate situations.

The second model for the practice of forgiveness in public life is the work of John the Baptist, the last prophet, one of the most mysterious figures in the New Testament (Myers, 1987: 587). Even if according to his supposed appartenance to the sect of Qumran (Witherington, III 1992: 384), John was not supposed to be interested in the corrupted society around (Tidball, 1983: 30), he makes the involvement in society as a responsible person, the sign for a changed life (Luke 3: 8a) (Nolland, 1989: 149). He opposed the "insistence on those moral principles which leads to a transformation of society from within" (Marshall, 1970: 894), to "the banditry of the Robin Hood type, and to revolutionary movement" (Myers, 1988: 58) based on violence, generated by oppression or by polarization between countryside and cities (Oakman, 1991: 152). Even his baptism has, "significance in the political context of the times" (Horsley, 1997: 30), John the Baptist was asked about the significance and implications of his teaching and baptism (Luke 3:10), and he "had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice towards their fellows and piety towards God" (Cassidy 1978: 21). Yet, there was something more in his preaching and ministry. In his message he is not offering to the crowds, a way of escaping from the society that is full of sin and injustice, or a way of overcoming the bad experience in society, with a religious practice based on an apocalyptic expectation of God's judgment or punishment.

Rather his message is deeply concerned with all aspects of the socio-political life of the day. John's program aims to revive, at the national level, concepts as righteousness and obedience to God. The message of John the Baptist did not point only the superficial level of the problem, but also the cause or the root of the problem, namely, Antipas' misunderstanding of his position in the history of Israel, and his socio-political program. How John the Baptist did that? By presenting the real Messiah (Luke 3: 16–17), and by presenting a new socio-political program based not on "aggressive economic development" (Hollenbach, 1992: 89–897) but on a changed life, in which forgiveness of God is made visible in socio-political life of the community in justice and loyalty (Luke 3: 3, 8, 11–14). Actually, this was the program of the Kingdom of God, and of Jesus Christ, based on forgiveness of sins, righteousness, justice, and piety in order to "remake the Galilee" (Horsley, 1997: 39–42). The entire ministry of John the Baptist was a declaration of the fact that only by turning to God, the individual, the society, the country, can overcome alienation, spiritual death, and can experience spiritual resurrection. The ministry of John the Baptist and its implications for socio-political life of his time, is a proof that the forgiveness experienced at the individual or ecclesial level is to have also an impact in the public life in society and in politics.

The third model for the practice of forgiveness in public life is the work of Jesus Christ. He is the supreme model for human life, the complete Man. The human being finds its value and significance in Christ, as Karl Barth said, "Man is the being, which is made visible in the mirror of Jesus Christ" (Barth, 1964: 3). Looking at Jesus Christ we can see also how the Church, as a community constituted by persons who experienced the forgiveness of God, can embody forgiveness in public life. The Church has to reflect in its internal life the "mutual love of the Trinitarian persons (Volf 1998: 207), and to mirror God's relationship in Christ with the world (Barth, 1964: 6). Only through this participation in Christ, human beings, and implicitly, fulfill they divine call as responsible persons, in communion with each other. Christ makes this communion possible, even between former enemies (Ephesians 2: 13–17) (Volf, 1996: 126).

According with Christ's kenotic model (Barth, 1960: 46), a kenotic attitude of the church concerning the society means a spirit of humbleness of the Church, who acknowledges that without Christ's initiative in forgiveness, the church would not be forgiven (Willmer, 2001: 17–18). This is also highlighted by the apostle Paul in Romans 5:10. This acknowledgement will be possible, if the church accepts, as Christ accepted, to be made sin, that meaning identification of the

church with her sins and the sins of society. Apostle Paul expresses at the individual level what could be the attitude of the church at the communal level (2 Corinthians 11: 29). If church is the space where forgiveness is properly understood, experienced, demonstrated and promoted, in its complexity, then this reality cannot stop at the church level. It will penetrate in every area of the society; will “contaminate” everything, because forgiveness as a part of the Gospel of Christ is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1: 16).

Why the Church should do that? Because it needs to understand that Christ is the Lord not only over the Church but also over the world (Cullmann, 1963: 224), and because redemption is a process based on the “principle of representation”. Also the Church has to transcend the individual level and to aim the communal level concerning its internal life and the life of society as well. This can be seen in the argument of Oscar Cullmann, that before Christ event the progress was “from many to the one” after the resurrection of Christ the progress is from “the One to the many” (Cullmann, 1962: 115, 116).

The consequence is that the Church has a responsibility not only in concern to its internal life but also to the life of society as a whole. Christ is our Representative before God, through his identification with us and represents God to us through His identification with God. In the same way Church’s identification is to be a twofold identification, with God and with the world. But Church’s identification is only by the way of her participation in Christ. Equally true is the fact that to follow Christ, the Church has to identify herself to the oppressed, captives, powerless, and marginalized (Constantineanu, 2014: 47). And the model of this double identification is Christ Himself.

Christ took over God’s role in the world, but in the process it was changed into the role of the helpless God, who in the world has been, and still is, mocked and tortured, burnt and gassed: that is the rock of the Christian faith which rests all its hope on God attaining his identity. In this faith, Christians know that God is helpless and needs help. When the time was fulfilled, God had done something for us for long enough. He put himself at risk, made himself dependent upon us, identified himself with the no identical. From now on, it is high time for us to do something for him (Solle, 1967: 150).

This is a real challenge for the Church today. Is her participation in Christ such a reality? Is her understanding of God so high? Is her love for God so great? Those are questions, which need an answer.

In a world of violence and unforgiveness the Church as a community who experienced the forgiveness of God, because of His initiative, has to show the same attitude of love and care. Following her Lord and Master, understanding that

Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world; and we must not sleep during that time (Solle, 1967: 335).

Contemporary aspects of Forgiveness in Public life and Politics

The necessity of forgiveness as a way to national reconciliation is very clear for example in Romania after the anticommunist revolution in 1989. One of the first slogans of post communist Romania in 1990 was the necessity of national reconciliation. The problem was that after fifty years of totalitarianism, oppression and intolerance, reconciliation, involving tolerance and dealing with the past with the eyes to the future, seemed to be rather a utopia than a realistic possibility. In the first electoral campaigns politicians involved at different levels with the Communist Party, in the past, were blamed and accused that they want to continue the communism in Romania, a so called “communism with a human face”. Yet, when the stringency of economic problems occurred, the past appurtenance to the communist structures became less important. If in 1992 or 1996 an electoral discourse based on political statement against communism, had a relative success, after the year 2000, it seems that the strategists of the electoral campaigns were unanimously in agreement, that only a discourse based on economic and not only political ideas, will win the attention of the population. And indeed, this is what happened. Did the electorate “forget” the belongings of some leaders to the Communist Party? Or did they “forgive” the past because of the present actions and behaviour of those leaders? One of the possibilities is that the actions and the actual behaviour of those leaders were some kind of “repentance” and the population offered, consecutively, the “forgiveness”.

Another important element is that the leaders themselves once “forgiven”, seemed to have more and more courage to address the problems of the society and to act with a kind of “freedom”. This can be interpreted along the idea that forgiveness means the release the “sinner”, making the future possible for him. Of course, national reconciliation is a painful process, and is still an aim, shadows of the past being present even in the most important moments of society.

Conclusion

If politics is “how humans ‘get along’ with each other in spite of their conflicts” (Shriver Jr., 1998: 14), then forgiveness is necessary to make this viable and complete. The Church, being the community where God has the first and the last word, has to be the model and embodiment of forgiveness. Having a balanced perspective about forgiveness, in both, vertical and horizontal dimension, following the example of God, who in Christ took the place of victim, the Church has to develop a

theology of forgiveness and reconciliation inspired from the Bible. Examples as Jeremiah and John the Baptist are still actual and relevant. But one of the most important things for the Church is to follow her Lord. As he represented God to us and us to God, the Church has to represent God in the world and world to God. This representation means no substitution but to pay the price of a kenotic attitude in the world. The church has to be aware that forgiveness is already present there in politics even if grounded on momentary or political interests and not very clear on a moral ground. Here, in this clarification of the necessary moral ground of forgiveness in politics, based on the idea of the value of every person, as created by God, and loved by Him, the Church could make a contribution.

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