Chapter 8

Once for All and New Every Morning: Forgiveness in the Theology of Miroslav Volf and Karl Barth

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Abstract

Taking its cues from the work of Miroslav Volf and Karl Barth, the paper looks at forgiveness as something inseparably embedded in the whole scope of Christ's reconciling activity. However, where Volf renders it along the lines of a Christ-motivated attitude change which instigates the real work of interpersonal reconciliation, Barth's *Doctrine of Reconciliation* depicts it as an ongoing ministry of the resurrected Christ in the affairs of those who follow Him. Though Volf's sociological analyses can be afforded a place in the activity of Christian ethical discernment, preference here is given to Barth's construal. Divine forgiveness is once-for-all not merely in the sense that it was accomplished in a particular historical event preceding our time but in the sense that the event itself *envelopes* our time—ever *present to it* and *perpetually invoked* from within it.

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Christians tend to be quite clear about the Father's once-for-all forgiveness in Jesus' name, but less so about whether or how it is articulated and applied as an ongoing event. There may be fresh requests for forgiveness, but these are the crisis moments and not the norm; the interruptions of a Christian life which is characterized more by *other things*. Where forgiveness *is* asked for repeatedly, it is doubtful whether many Christians believe God needs to actually re-forgive. Confession may then be more therapy than invocation—forgiveness being construed as a divine act of the past which clears the ground for a redemptive future but is related to the present by other means. When applied on the day to day level of interpersonal relationships, then, what it means to forgive can also be quite ambiguous. No wonder that it frequently becomes a therapeutically decisive deference to the cross that renders the past passed, diffuses conflict, or distances from pain, but goes no

further. In light of the teachings of Jesus in places (such as the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18, or the post-resurrection charge to the disciples in John 20 and its reverberations in Ephesians 4 and 1 John 4), it must be asked whether and how forgiveness might have more of an *abiding* part in the Christian life.

This question surfaces quite illustratively in a comparative analysis of the sociologically-concerned theology of Miroslav Volf and the *Doctrine of Reconciliation* in Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. Both helpfully describe Christian forgiveness as inseparably embedded in the whole scope of Christ's reconciling activity, but their respective views of how this plays out in the present moment are illuminating. Whereas Volf's focus is on the human agent carrying on in light of the promise of Christ crucified and coming again, Barth's is on the activity of Christ crucified, risen and on his way to his goal with us in history. Taking its cues from these interlocutors, this paper brings Volf's textured account of the ethics of forgiveness into the light of Barth's depiction of it as a once-for-all event which is also new every morning in the lives of Jesus' disciples and the perpetuation of Christian community.

1. Miroslav Volf and the Ethics of Forgiveness

In recent years, Miroslav Volf has been at the forefront of a host of thinkers who have aimed (among other things) to narrow in on the precise meaning that divine forgiveness has for Christian life and community. His 1996 book *Exclusion and Embrace* explored the sociological import of the Christian gospel, recognizing people as social agents created to image the triune God and focusing on 'what kind of selves we need to be,' how those selves are fostered, and how a cultural climate can be shaped for them to thrive (Volf 1996, 21). Its driving imperative is Jesus' promotion of peace, truth and justice to the exclusion of enmity and sin through a posture of self-giving embrace rather than manipulative means of the aggressive or passive-aggressive variety (47). By forgiving, a person does not 'act as if sin was not there' but knowingly 'embrace[s] perpetrators in forgiveness because God has embraced them through atonement' (294). Thus Volf aptly described the interconnectedness of forgiving with other aspects of reconciliation (such as truth-telling, justice-seeking, and relation-restoring) and showed how much it all hangs on the promises of God to broken humanity in Jesus Christ.

By the time *The End of Memory* had been published a decade later, Volf's line of thought had unfolded into an emphasis on human agency in which Christ's justifying forgiveness provides for and then takes a back seat to the procedures of *Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. The *not yet* of the gospel effectively eclipses the *already*, with considerable ramifications for

the *now*.[1] While the work of reconciliation is *enabled* by the gift of forgiveness it is the act of not remembering wrongs anymore which will ultimately return people to the state enjoyed prior to wrongdoing (Volf 2006, 134). Christ's atoning sacrifice in history past and His promised final reconciliation in history future are related to the meantime largely in terms of negating cause and intended positive effect. Sin is forgiven so one can learn from it, unencumbered by the counterparts of guilt, fear, and despair. Christ's forgiveness 'facilitates' provisional progress that is buoyed by ultimate hope rather than having succumbed to the spiral of self-defeat.[2] Whatever *forgiving* might initially entail, the posture of embrace is maintained through the ensuing practices of *remembering* Christ's death for sin and *anticipating* His promise of final reconciliation (208). Thus when attention is turned to the interpersonal realm in the church and society, the human echo of divine forgiveness is ultimately described as an *attitude change* which enables reconciliation, the impetus that makes further work possible.[3] Forgiveness is rendered a divine and decisive act of the past which takes the emotional punch out of sin and turns the tables so that hope may prevail; it is 'the boundary between exclusion and embrace' (Volf 1996, 125).

As a boundary-marker, however, forgiveness does tend to get lost in the past and give way to other things. New markers may be laid, but they too recede in favour of a focus on more pressing aspects of an *ordo salutis* which renders Christianity in terms of distinct, progressive stages—initiatory mercy, ensuing activity, and final grace (131-132). As Volf would have it, forgiveness of sin may be one thing, but it is the 'non-remembrance of wrongs suffered [that] appropriately crowns forgiveness' (Volf 2006, 208). Whether heaven is a place of nonremembrance or not, it is Volf's *insistence* on this point that is so telling.[4] The capacity of human beings to forget things takes

[1] John Webster had already signalled the trajectory in Volf's thought toward a church more *prospective* than *retrospective* (Webster 2001, 218).

[2] Given that humankind finds itself waiting for Judgment Day, 'a *nonfinal reconciliation in the midst of the struggle against oppression* is what a responsible theology must be designed to facilitate,' lest it fall for the 'seductive ideology of a false liberation' (Volf 1996, 109-110).

[3] As a 'genuinely free act which does not merely re-act,' forgiveness is 'what it takes to struggle for nonfinal reconciliation by readjusting dynamic identities' (Volf 1996, 121, 110; cf. Shriver 1995, 19).

[4] In *The End of Memory* Volf claims to have changed his position on whether Christ would bear the wounds of the cross in eternity as reminders of his sacrifice for sin, suffering and death, but the trajectory is already in place for him to come to this conclusion in *Exclusion and Embrace*. There it is indeed implied that the Lamb of God may be visibly slain in heaven, but Revelation 22:14 is the reference given rather than Revelation 5:6. Thus it would seem that outright forgetting of the past is already the thrust of forgiveness – a telling sign of the elevation of psychological and sociological observations over biblical and theological proclamations to come in his later work (Volf 2006, 191 n.23; Volf 1996, 140).

on an eschatological significance that overshadows even the accomplishment of Jesus Christ at Easter. The practical implication is that forgiveness is a past event that leads to a different kind of future event, and in the present what we are left with are 'pre-eschatological anticipations of the eschatological nonremembering' that are tempered by our need to remember sin in order properly to negotiate relational healing and pursue a provisional justice in this world (Volf 1996, 136).

Given the content of *The End of Memory* and its subtitle, *Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, readers might be tempted to characterize humanity as only *teleologically* good. Though for Volf all is defined according to God's prior self-giving and goodness, what tends to drive the theological ship is the present circumstance of fallenness and evil (cf. Volf 2006, 160-161, 203, 206; Volf 2005, 141). While Volf is careful not to describe forgiveness as acting 'as if' sin were not present (he calls this is a serious misconstrual), his stated reason is not protological or ontological but is that such an attitude would amount to presumptuous 'living as if the world were redeemed when in fact it is not' (Volf 1996, 294). Not even 'heaven can *rectify* Auschwitz,' he says; only 'nonremembering can end the lament over suffering which no thought can think away and no action undo' (Volf 1996, 135; cf. Soelle 1975, 149). This argument has an emotional force to it, but the very fact that Volf reckons that sin must be forgotten to be fully redeemed brings into question the supremacy of Christ over time (Volf 2006, 154, 168, 208). This gives a curious import to his assertion that 'the spring of our brook and the bow of our arrow is *nothing* from our past, but *instead* the eternal God' (202, emphasis mine). The implications for forgiveness are significant. As Milbank adeptly points out, where non-remembrance alone guarantees reconciliation, 'every secular performance of forgiveness poses as an illusory *eschaton*,' serving as a place-holder until the real work of reconciliation (which is ultimately a restorative negation) can take place (Milbank 2003, 59).[5]

If the Christian life is anything in the present, it is remembering rightly, learning from the past as much as possible, and holding out hope amidst all this chaos and sin. This is precisely the trajectory of Volf's ethic, which is disturbed by the gap between forgiveness and ultimate nonremembrance and fills it with the imitation of Christ. As he puts it, this

[5] Furthermore, if Volf's rendering is held up to John Milbank's analysis it appears to be close to a theory of evil as *radical* rather than as *privation*. As such it is prone to the false glamourization of the terrible events of world or personal history to the obfuscation of the true pinnacle of evil in the world, the death of the Son of God at human hands. Eclipsed also is the revelation of death's loss of sting at the resurrection. Alternatively, if evil is privation and forgiveness is ultimately positive, evil's negation is both negated and overturned, so that evil can neither be called good nor given such pride of place that it needs to be forgotten for good to prevail (Milbank 2003, 26-27, 54-55).

means 'doing in our human way what God does in a divine way' (Volf 2006, 120, 142, 169). In fact, 'When we forgive those who have wronged us, we make our own God's miracle of forgiveness' (208). Furthermore, Volf declares quite readily that he believes 'in the redeeming *power* of memory' and the '*logic* of grace,' and agrees with Elie Wiesel that 'salvation, like redemption, can only be found in memory' (20, 209, 19, emphasis mine). When it comes to ecclesiology, then, we should not be surprised to read that Volf is less concerned to outline what it might mean for us to daily pray God 'forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors' than to promote churches as 'schools of right remembering' (128).[6] Forgiveness is rendered a past event with ramifications for the present, but in the transition from the divine/human to the interpersonal the new-creation gift of forgiveness defers to anthropological memory studies and strategies (142).[7]

2. Karl Barth and the Ethics of Forgiveness

The issues here are not new. A central difficulty in describing (let alone living) the Christian life often comes down to how one perceives the past (namely Christ's life, death and resurrection) affecting the present (Barth 1956, 287). For his part, Barth addresses 'Lessing's ditch' by pointing out that the gap between God and humanity has been fully crossed by Jesus Christ, but rather than denying the force of the question he reckons that it is one *raised by Easter itself* and diverts it to its proper place as a question of time and space in light of the resurrection, where Jesus was revealed as the Lord of time (287; cf. Barth 1961a, 300, 320; Barth 1960, 437f). Thus he counter-proposes that if the belief is true that Christ is risen and therefore 'present here and now for us in the full efficacy of what He was and did then and there' then inquiries about historical distance are a stalling technique—another way that we find to 'hide ourselves (like Adam and Eve in the garden) from Jesus Christ as He makes himself present' (Barth 1956, 291-292). For Barth it is telling that we find it more incredible that God can be with us than that we can be with God (Barth 1958, 307). Thus he warns vigorously against inserting a new Mediator precisely at the point where one has been provided, as if one comes to faith in Jesus Christ only to have to bridge Lessing's gap oneself. If Christ is made present *by* our recollection then everything rests on a self-salvation (Barth 1956, 288; cf. 313).

Far from rendering us merely passive, however, Barth holds that Christ is present and active in the community by His Spirit *through* its

[6] For a contrasting way of putting it, see Barth 2002, 55-56.

[7] For an interesting example of the latter from the field of psychology, see a description of the seven 'memory sins' of 'transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence' and their incipient 'adaptive strengths' for the promotion of human life in Schacter 2001, 4-6.

recollection, tradition and proclamation, because divine agency and human agency are not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, within true freedom the human activity operates in an irreversible flow of grace from the divine (313). Thus, for all their efforts Christians 'have continually to become afresh what they are as they once became it,' such that justification and sanctification find 'continual confirmation in their life-history' (Barth 1961b, 483).[8] This is not something the believer makes happen, it *has happened* and therefore *happens* not because Christ is properly *recollected* but because He is *present* as He was past (Barth 1961a, 223-224; cf. 478).[9] For Barth, if Christ has not raised not only our faith but also our forgiveness is useless (1 Cor. 15:14).

As a man Jesus has his own time, but He also has more than that: risen and exalted He is the Contemporary of all (Barth 1960, 440). His eternal life is not the same as atemporality, but is the 'full possession of all modes of time' (John Webster, personal communication; cf. Barth 1961a, 43-45; Barth 1961b, 483). The Living Word brings not timeless truths but time and again the 'advent of the new man here and now,' which involves also the 'present passing of the old man' and the 'present irruption of [the eschatological] future' (Barth 1960, 441; Barth 1961, 249). Since the Christ event shines and speaks not as one more lesson of history but as the primary history which is basic to all recollected history, it overlaps all history and 'takes place again and again secondarily' within it (Barth 1961, 224). On Barth's account, in God's mercy we may or may not forget past wrongs but forgiveness is not *crowned* by non-remembrance. The Christian is not told to live *just as if he'd never sinned*, but is called out of that 'form of existence in which he lived as though Jesus Christ were not the One He is for all men and therefore for him, into another form of existence in which this stupid "as if" is left behind, in which he makes use of the freedom given him' (Barth 1961b, 350; cf. Barth

[8] 'This does not mean, however, that the vocation of man acquires relevance and significance for him only when it takes place in his own life-history, when he is addressed as one who is called by Jesus Christ, and when he begins to know and acknowledge himself as such and to act accordingly. Like his justification and sanctification, prior to its actualisation in his own history it has its basis, as we must say first and supremely, in his election in Jesus Christ "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1^4)' (Barth 1961b, 483; cf. Barth 2002, 54-58).

[9] Jesus' is 'a history which itself makes history. It will not be outside space and time' but from the spiritual sphere will also 'be a part of the corresponding though not identical earthly life, both psychical and physical' (Barth 1961b, 500, 517; cf. Barth 1958, 94, 98, 107). It would seem that Barth considers the promised forgiveness of sins along with the inheritance of divine sonship as a 'lively hope' which is 'to be sought and apprehended afresh every moment out of the deepest need' in its 'constant prevailing' upon temporal history which makes not only the present but also the past and future 'ever new' (Barth 1956, 602). As Augustine might put it, Christ's presence comes to bear on the 'present of things past' (memory), the 'present of things present' (immediate awareness), and the 'present of things to come' (expectation) (Augustine 1991, 235).

1956, 221, 596-597). Divine forgiveness comes to people only as it is heard and accepted from the living Christ, and people are 'imprisoned afresh' if they cease to be hearers (and sharers!) of that pardon at every moment (Barth 1956, 575; cf. Barth 1958, 836; Barth 2002, 54-56). As 'a history and not an appropriated state,' it is shared on earth not as we echo in our own way what God has done, but as the Living Word speaks and shines in our free co-operation and opens to us the ministry of reconciliation (Barth 1958, 99).

3. This Present Forgiveness

Bringing Barth into conversation with Volf leads us to ask: Is the created human capacity to forget wrongs or to tolerate others for the sake of relative peace comparable to what is being triggered by justification? Is redemption but a granting of amnesty in order to revert (again and again) to the same old capacities and thus the same human struggle? Is divine forgiveness a re-assertion of a created good or is it something new? If new, does it become the *possession* of believers or does it continue to present itself as grace?[10] In Barth's rendering, forgiveness is not a human capacity triggered by the atonement but is something that invades time and proceeds along within it as part and parcel of what comes to us in Christ every moment because once and for all He died for sin and rose from the dead. If there is a power to the Christian life it is 'the power of His resurrection as it demonstrates itself to us' (Barth 1958, 307). In his rejection of the *ordo salutis*, Barth made it clear that he preferred to think of the experiences of redeeming grace not as 'a series of different divine actions' but as 'different "moments" of the one redemptive occurrence coming to man in the *simul* of the one event' (Barth 1958, 502-503).

Does this make Barth's ethics of reconciliation not only un-pragmatic but impractical, even un-practicable? It seems an impossible if not oppressive situation if, as in Barth's depiction, the Christian is not made ready but is set on a march and given resources as needed (Barth 1958, 376). Barth calls this liberating, but it does seem to throw one back on one's own courage of conviction, sureness of faith, and persistence in prayer precisely when no resources are said to be required.[11] Nonetheless he is adamant that what is

[10] Barth insists that self-giving love, which incorporates forgiveness, is *new* (Barth 1958, 777, 784f; cf. Webster 2001, 218f).

[11] Indeed, Barth says: 'Where and when man trusts the promise, where and when he dares to treat it as directed to himself, to apply it to himself, to accept it as true of himself, there the forgiveness of sins takes place, that line is drawn, the new situation from which he can set out is created. . . . There he already has it, and he can and should dare to live as one who is forgiven. The phrase "the forgiveness of sins" is well adapted to sum up all that has to be said in this connexion. But it is better not to try to sum it all up in this phrase' (Barth 1956, 599).

asked for will be given as the Spirit brings the Word to bear on Christian life in community.[12] As Barth would have it, and if Matthew 18 is any indication, heaven's loosing of earth from the grips of sin and enmity is unleashed where believers in Christ invoke His forgiving and reconciling presence upon their situations of enmity and discord (Matt. 18; cf. Barth 1961b, 861). But if Christian communion and the ethics of reconciliation are ever new in each present moment, it has often been asked, what good is reference to our churched context (space) and the gains of tradition (time)? This would be a problem if Barth held to divine agency to the exclusion of human agency, but this is not the case. God's free activity enfolds and activates free obedience in the community where situations must be weighed, attention to truth, love, justice, memory, and community given, and wisdom employed. However, the dynamics of reconciliation and the ethics of forgiveness rise and fall on the invocation of Jesus Christ and the heeding of the Spirit's direction as they come freely in the context of the Word's promised guidance of persons in Christian community (cf. Webster 2001, 221-230; Webster 1995, 174-213; Biggar 1993, 123-145).

It might be possible to see Volf and Barth as complementary to some degree, but only if, as Nigel Biggar puts it regarding Barth's ethics, Volf's socio-analysis is considered an 'aid to hearing' God's command and is not allowed to drown it out at any moment (Biggar 1993, 7ff.).[13] However, for Barth the word 'aid' is still too strong. The living Word needs no aid to be heard, but does speak by His Spirit through the Scriptures as read in the church in dialogue with the world. Thus paying attention to psychological and social sciences might be *part of* listening for God's command, but not some kind of supplement, prerequisite, or guide for Christian ethics. God's forgiveness is not extended on the interpersonal level as a general principle but always as an impetus of God that comes in 'supreme immediacy and directness' (Barth 1956, 595). Volf's approach implies that forgiveness is a possession and a power of the believer rather than a gift perpetually received from God. As he puts it: 'Because God has forgiven, we also have the power to forgive' (Volf 2005, 197). Conversely, Barth vigilantly insists that Christ does not impart merely 'His goods but supremely and decisively Himself'

[12] As Barth sees it, this daring life of the forgiven is not reliant on one's own conjured boldness but the sureness of God's promise (Barth 1961b, 814-815).

[13] Biggar cites one commentator who explicitly states that what Barth needed most was the help of social scientific literature (like Volf's) in order to get right the context in which God's command is to be obeyed (Biggar 1993, 23, cf. West 1958, 286). But Barth would likely combat this along the lines of Eric Wolf's *Rechtsgedanke und biblische Weisung*: 'What might it not mean for the world if Church order and law were not merely spiritual adaptations of worldly constitutions and codes, but genuine and original witnesses to the brotherly fellowship of Jesus Christ!' (Barth 1958, 719, quoting Wolf 1948, 91).

(Barth 1961b, 551).[14] 'Christian experience,' writes Barth, 'lives entirely by Him and cannot curve in upon itself as self-sufficiency' (Barth 1956, 249). Thus in Matthew 18 it should be seen as no accident that Jesus bridges from a procedural account of interpersonal reconciliation to a parable about forgiveness with the promise not only that 'where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them' but also that what is asked for will be given by His Father in heaven (Matt. 18:19-20). Heaven's loosing of earth from the grips of sin and enmity is unleashed where believers in Christ invoke His forgiving and reconciling presence upon their situations of enmity and discord (Barth 1961b, 861).

Certainly Volf affirms that 'God is not absent from the space we inhabit' and we 'are carried on the wings of God's presence and activity' (Volf 2005, 165), but Barth effectively exposes the tendency of ethics such as his to obscure this very fact. Rather than turning the Christian life into a self-help exercise, Barth's ethic encourages a thoughtful engagement with one another in invocation of and penitent obedience before the risen Lord. When the Christian life is depicted mainly in terms of *imitation* it tends to keep Christ in the past, puts his effects to the future, and leaves people stranded in between to fend for themselves. Reconciliation cannot be distilled into steps or strategy, but when it is stridently thought of first as penitential *participation* in Christ's present life by his self-perpetuating grace, the ethics takes on a vitality that can be eminently practical without being merely pragmatic (Barth 2002, 55). In a Barthian rendering, the psychological and sociological phenomena of re-remembering or forgetting may be seen as anthropological illustrations commandeered to help us understand the divine gift of forgiveness, but they are not to be elevated either into goals that forgiveness serves or means to its ends. Thus for all Volf's exemplary description of the *interrelated aspects* of reconciliation, when it comes to a theology and an ethic of Christian forgiveness, Barth's construal offers a better way forward, and provides a frame in which any contributions that might be gained from Volf's socio-theological analyses can be discerned.

Conclusion

Reading Volf in light of Barth it might best be said that forgiveness reckons sin within a larger and more importantly a superior history in which it is not necessarily forgotten but is *remembered negated*, remembered as overcome for us by Jesus Christ. This engenders the kind of interpersonal

[14] The grace of Christ cannot be collected and hoarded like manna in the wilderness, and Jesus Christ is not simply 'now at our disposal' (Barth 1958, 124, 287). The thematic relation of Lamentations 3:19-24 (and its thematic echo of manna in the desert) to the Lord's Prayer (where forgiveness follows on the heels of the prayer for daily bread), is particularly intriguing in this regard.

forgiveness that is not a trite glossing over of hurt for a false-peace inducing cover-up nor a relativizing of the offense next to the offender's overall goodness or the victim's own sinfulness, but an invocation of Christ for the life of freedom and reconciliation which He opens up in the present moment. Volf's consistent recollection of the world's current perpetuations of violence should caution readers of Barth from an over-realized eschatology that fails to long for the full redemption, realized justice, and completed peace that awaits humanity in the new creation. However, this is no warrant for eclipsing Christ's accomplished work with a hoped-for nonremembrance and inserting an *ordo reconciliatio* to fill in the gap (cf. Volf 2006, 64-67, 151, 173-174).

Christian forgiveness cannot be reduced to a power or a principle or a step in a model. It is part of what happens to people who are caught up in Christ's ministry of reconciliation as aspects of it are woven together in the world in Jesus' time and by His Spirit. This Spirit is promised to the community of disciples, but is also active in the world. As a result it is entirely possible for Christians to engage with societal promotion of truth, justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation – but this does not entail trust in political structures or the illusion that there are psychological or sociological formulae that make sense or even work properly apart from Christ. Because the Spirit may be active in society incognito, it is of course possible for Christians to learn from events and dynamics of reconciliation that take place outside the community of faith. However, for all the ways that Christian forgiveness may look similar to and even beneficially promote societal tolerance and political reconciliation, it is fundamentally different at the most basic level: it was, is, and remains *grace*. It continues to come to us by the intervention of Christ who is seated at the right hand of the Father in the Kingdom of Heaven and is also present on earth in resurrection power where two or three are gathered in His name, where He is on His way from a finished work to a completed eventuality. Thus his forgiveness is once for all people and once for all times, new every morning not by our great faithfulness but His.

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