

Preventing Abusive Theology

Safeguarding Survivors and Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse When Theologizing with Forgiveness

Jennifer Loop

The Wisconsin Center for Christian Studies

jloop@wisccs.org

Abstract

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a global and pervasive form of violence against persons under the age of 18. The data suggests that you, the reader, know someone in the church or in your family who is a survivor or perpetrator of CSA. This person could also be you. This article explores the ways in which CSA complexifies certain theological descriptions and understandings of forgiveness. The guiding idea argues that theologies of forgiveness that ignore the epistemological contributions of trauma theories and the lived experience of survivors and perpetrators may be generative of further abuse in the context of CSA. It will be argued that safeguarding these persons should include collaborative interdisciplinary dialogue when theologizing with forgiveness. The concluding section will suggest that the vernacular of forgiveness used in ecclesial contexts might expand by reimagining nuanced concepts, metaphors, or words, which will resource those who think and write about forgiveness, pastoral counsellors, and more importantly, offer survivors and perpetrators an alternative way forward.

Keywords

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), Forgiveness, Abusive Theology, Trauma, Survivors, Perpetrators

Reflexive Preface

The genesis of my interest in this topic includes a personal desire to understand what it means to forgive my primary abuser and the ongoing sexual abuse that occurred from the ages of 9–12. I believe that divine forgiveness of sins was accomplished by Jesus of



Nazareth, in whom death was suffered by God and defeated. I believe God raised Jesus from the dead and those who share in his resurrection life by the Spirit in God's new creation are no longer guilty for their sins. As such, interpersonal forgiveness may be motivated or energized by God's forgiveness, but humans do not forgive as God forgives (e.g., removing guilt), nor is there an obligation for people to forgive when traumatic injury makes it impossible for them to do so, or when it is unnecessary (e.g., when an accused offender denies any wrongdoing occurred). It is my belief that God's forgiveness was available to my primary abuser in ways that are different categorically from my own capabilities, and that would have achieved entirely different existential and relational outcomes.

Next, the way I see the world is influenced through lenses of being a biracial, Asian/white American, cisgender, and straight woman. While I am attuned to inequities within gender and racial dynamics, I am mindful that I do not experience abuse or injustice as other people of colour or groups within US or UK societies or the church.¹ As a CSA survivor one of the ways in which I interpret Scripture includes a hermeneutic of trauma.² Finally, my experience of CSA does not include abuse committed by a clergy person, and thus, I may be less aware of abusive power dynamics in some ecclesial contexts.

Terminology

In this article, I refer to persons who have experienced sexual abuse under the age of 18 as 'survivors', which is a term meant to signpost the all-encompassing horror of CSA and its lasting effects.³ However, I agree with Anthony Priddis that we respect the wishes of those who have suffered and 'use whatever language they say'.⁴

'Perpetrators' signals those who have committed CSA, and includes those persons currently convicted, incarcerated, or released, and those whose actions have never been reported. I also affirm the distinction 'recovering perpetrators',⁵ for persons who continue to participate in an accountability programme or have completed treatment and have not repeated molestations – although this may not be fully verifiable.⁶ Finally, I recognize that some who have sexually abused children may also be CSA survivors, and that others with pedophilia are not always perpetrators. These distinctions are outside the scope of this

¹ This observation was noted by Caleb Dav in a personal email communication on 16 Feb 2021, wherein I queried if 'straight' is an oppressive or unhelpful term to express heterosexuality. Dav's current PhD research at Durham University involves evangelical understandings of gender, sex, and marriage. In response to my question, he also noted that LGBTI+ people, especially transgender women of colour, are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse in societies like the US and UK.

² By this I mean the ways in which lived experience alongside other theological interpretations reveal meanings that are not obvious from a plain reading of the text. For an exploration of a hermeneutics of trauma and trauma as a heuristic framework, see Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, eds., *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), especially chapter 1.

³ Anthony Priddis, *Forgiveness: A Practical and Pastoral Companion*, (Norfolk: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2019), 60.

⁴ Priddis, *Forgiveness*, 60.

⁵ James Newton Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem*, (Nashville: Abington Press, 1991), 54.

⁶ Poling, *Abuse*, 61–70.

article. Generally, I believe that despite past abuse persons who commit CSA are blameworthy and are accountable for their choices – even when past abuse, impulsive behaviours, or addictions diminished their self-control to prevent harm.⁷

Next, I am inclined towards research that evidences ‘children rarely lie about CSA [and] cases of false accusations are extremely rare’,⁸ and that perpetrators rarely admit blame and deny or excuse their actions.⁹ I approach stories of CSA narrated by adult survivors with trust rather than with suspicion of false accusation. However, I believe it is equally important to safeguard those who are accused of abuse, and whether guilty or not, adequate concern and pastoral support is vital. This should include using terminology such as ‘alleged victim/survivor’ or alleged perpetrator when appropriate.¹⁰

Introduction

This article offers a critique of a strand of Reformed theologies of forgiveness that can be abusive to some persons in the context of CSA. The type of theologizing in view exhibits epistemological imbalances that exist because of what ethicist Miranda Fricker has identified as ‘hermeneutical injustice’ (*Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, 2009),¹¹ which disallows certain voices from contributing to theological knowledge. When lived experience is roadblocked from critical dialogue to reshape inadequate Christian doctrine or principles of forgiveness, there is a potential for harm in ecclesial practice.

The definition of abusive theology in view reflects a theological schema or theological ideas that might be implicated in sustaining or concealing abuse or reinforcing the continuing suffering of survivors of abuse.¹² It will be argued that theologies of interpersonal forgiveness must be informed by knowledge of human behavior in general and trauma theories in particular for the context of CSA. Thus, what it might mean for a Christian survivor to forgive a perpetrator must be shaped by Scripture, tradition, collaborative interdisciplinary engagement, *and* theological reflection that sees lived experience as the domain where Christian action takes place.¹³

⁷ Sharon Lamb, *The Trouble with Blame: Victims, Perpetrators, and Responsibility* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 85–87.

⁸ Slávka Karkošková, ‘Ethical dilemmas in dealing with cases of child sexual abuse’, in I. Kovalčíková and L. W. Sørbye (eds), *Ethical Challenges in Professional Praxis: Experiences from Slovakia and Norway*, (Prešov: University of Prešov, 2011), 119–37 (122).

⁹ Lamb, *Blame*, 57–59.

¹⁰ Church of England, ‘A Betrayal of Trust: The Independent Report into the Handling of Allegations that Have Come to the Attention of the Church of England Concerning the Late Hubert Victor Whitsey, Former Bishop of Chester’, Chapter 4: Terminology, Items 54 and 56, (2020), <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/A%20Betrayal%20of%20Trust%20-%20Learning%20Lessons%20Case%20Review%20Regarding%20Hubert%20Victor%20Whitsey%20%2819.01.21%29.pdf>, accessed 17 February 2021.

¹¹ John Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2020), 145.

¹² Stephen Pattison. *A Critique of Pastoral Care* (London: SCM, 1989). 170.

¹³ Zoe Bennet, et al., *Invitation to Research in Practical Theology*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), 70.

Theologizing with forgiveness in this context necessitates interdisciplinary work that does not position theology atop an epistemological hierarchy of knowledge. Jennifer Baldwin observes that because the church is ignorant of traumatic processing it is often a place of re-traumatization when it comes to the care of survivors.¹⁴ Uninformed clergy may contribute to 'secondary victimization that is created by the inappropriate reactions of people to them'.¹⁵

In ecclesial contexts, inattentiveness to the effects of experiencing *or perpetrating* traumatic injury can result in preaching or teaching of abusive theologies of forgiveness that reinforce *self-blame by survivors, denial by perpetrators, or catalyses abusive dynamics in practice*. For example, researchers (Adshead, Ferrito, and Bose, 2015) investigated redemptive narratives with homicide perpetrators and identified the importance of relating to and living with the *offender identity* (emphasis mine).¹⁶ Thus, talk of forgiveness in the church may be harmful to some when it ignores or denies the need for remorse.¹⁷ Finally, whilst sketching precise contours of what constitutes abusive theology in practice is outside the scope of this article, this area is an opportunity for further interdisciplinary work and revision. Baldwin rightly cautions, 'when everything is "abusive", then experiences of traumatising abuse are rendered invisible in the cacophony'.¹⁸

Methodological Assumptions

The interdisciplinary dialogue imagined here assumes that a model of mutual critical conversation is necessary for 'capturing the hermeneutic to-and-fro between experience, theology and illuminative theories'.¹⁹ This framework grants equal weighting to disciplinary partners and suggests that theologizing might open to radical change informed by other epistemologies.²⁰ Three methodological assumptions must be noted. First, the epistemic nature of theology is not only revealed but also emerges from dialectical conversation.²¹ Secondly, disparate domains are not stratified whereby theology supersedes all others, as outlined by Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger's Chalcedonian pattern.²² Rather, following Fraser Watts, the domain that takes priority is the one best suited for the context, and

¹⁴ Jennifer Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma* (La Vergne: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 3.

¹⁵ Karkošková, 'Ethical', 119.

¹⁶ Gwen Adshead and Jesse Butler-Meadows, 'Out of the Depths: Offenders and Forgiveness', in Stephen Hance (ed), *Forgiveness in Practice*, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019), 60–68 (66).

¹⁷ For a fuller treatment of interpersonal remorse within a framework of Christian theology see Anthony Bash, *Remorse: A Christian Perspective*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020).

¹⁸ Baldwin, *Trauma*, 22.

¹⁹ Stephen Pattison, 'Conversations in Practical Theology', *Practical Theology*, 13 (2020), 87–94 (88).

²⁰ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn (London: SCM Press, 2016), 76–79.

²¹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical*, 77.

²² Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling: A New Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 65.

considers the particular aspect of forgiveness in view to determine the most suitable framework of knowledge.²³ Thirdly, lived Christian experience may mediate and reveal truth claims as the embodiment of theology in practice,²⁴ and participates as equal dialogue partner for shaping theologies of forgiveness in this context.

Child Sexual Abuse Complexifies Forgiveness

A 2014 World Health Organisation (WHO) report estimates that 18 percent of girls, and 8 percent of boys worldwide have experienced sexual abuse.²⁵ However, research also indicates that approximately 90 percent of cases go unreported.²⁶ In the US, 91 percent of CSA is perpetrated by someone the child or child's family knows and contributes to an adverse childhood experience (ACE), which affects how a person thinks, acts and feels over a lifetime.²⁷ When a child's life includes an ACE, one result is *trauma*, a wound. Baldwin distinguishes trauma as a response to an experience, not the event itself.²⁸ Thus, one may be a survivor of traumatic experience(s) and a survivor of post-traumatic responses or injuries.²⁹

In the context of CSA, there is an assumption that forgiveness is useful for healing from traumatic injury or post-traumatic responses to abuse. Psychological concepts dominate Western thinking about forgiveness as a salutary process of resolving or relieving unwanted emotions, unhelpful thinking, or undesirable behaviours. One empirical study of incest survivors evidenced substantial psychological healing for *every* participant, including decreased anger and anxiety and increased hopefulness, which followed therapeutic forgiveness of the perpetrator.³⁰ As such, cautions against prescribing forgiveness in psychotherapy often go unheeded as ethical issues are ignored in the pursuit of psychological relief.³¹

In response, to this infiltration of 'therapeutic forgiveness'³² some theologians have sought to regain a distinctly christological meaning. L. Gregory Jones opines, 'We have secularized our own language and have not been effectively immunized against therapeutic

²³ Fraser Watts, 'Christian Theology', in Fraser Watts, and Liz Gulliford (eds), *Forgiveness in Context: Theology and Psychoanalysis in Creative Dialogue* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 1–10 (4).

²⁴ Zoe Bennet, et al., *Invitation*, 70.

²⁵ 'Website of the World Health Organisation', <https://apps.who.int/violence-info/child-maltreatment/> (accessed 28 Apr 2020).

²⁶ Karkošková, 'Ethical', 119.

²⁷ 'Website of the Centers for Disease Control: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse', <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/childsexualabuse.html> (accessed 28 Apr 2020).

²⁸ Baldwin, *Trauma*, 25.

²⁹ Baldwin, 3.

³⁰ Robert D. Enright, *Forgiveness Is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*, 1st edn (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 17.

³¹ Sharon Lamb, and Jeffrie G. Murphy, *Before Forgiving: Cautionary Views of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.

³² L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 35–69.

grammar'.³³ Likewise, Jon Coutts observes Christian forgiveness has surrendered to the rubric of psychological therapy and that it must be differentiated from anthropological analogies in the world.³⁴ What both scholars seem to be saying is that 'forgiveness' has been hijacked, and the church must regain what it means to forgive *Christianly*.³⁵

These critiques rightly set Christian frameworks of forgiveness apart from therapeutic constructs. However, when impermeable theological boundaries are enforced, trauma theories that illuminate protracted periods of post-traumatic processing³⁶ do not have the necessary access to revise abusive theological imperatives to forgive. What I am suggesting is that a nuanced understanding and vernacular of forgiveness in the church must emerge continually through collaboration with secular disciplines and the knowledge of lived experience. Jones suggests that 'Christian forgiveness needs to be attentive to and in dialogue with psychological and psychoanalytical concerns if people are to become holy'.³⁷ However, the ways in which theology might attend to other epistemologies in actual practice remains opaque, especially in complex contexts of traumatic injury.

Both Jones and Coutts acknowledge forgiveness requires contextualization. In the context of CSA, abusive theology can emerge when oversimplified therapeutic frameworks dominate theological reflection. However, it seems these strands of Reformed thought protest psychologized language of forgiveness in the church too much. When rigid theological disciplinary boundaries are overemphasized, psychological or moral concerns and lived experience are neglected. Baldwin points out that 'a theology that is ignorant of trauma process is more likely to harm than to offer good news'.³⁸ Additionally, perpetrators are at risk of continuing in denial of sexual deviance and crime when forgiveness is offered hastily.

One way forward might be to attend to the lived experience of persons in specific contexts. Priddis, writing about forgiveness in pastoral care, cites Marie M. Fortune in her work *Forgiveness: The Last Step* (1995), which revealed a group of recovering incest offenders warning *against* pastoral responses of forgiveness 'because it had enabled them to continue to avoid accountability for their offences'.³⁹ These warnings from lived experience complexify when to prioritize forgiving promptly or when to withhold forgiving patiently. Further research might explore how recovering perpetrators might inform theological understandings of when and how to forgive. The next section turns to explore further how some unbalanced theologies of forgiveness can be damaging.

³³ Jones, *Embodying*, 38.

³⁴ Jon Coutts, *A Shared Mercy: Karl Barth on Forgiveness and the Church, New Explorations in Theology* (Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 96, 99.

³⁵ Coutts, *Shared*, 11.

³⁶ Baldwin, *Trauma*, 29.

³⁷ Jones, *Embodying*, 39.

³⁸ Baldwin, *Trauma*, 12.

³⁹ Priddis, *Forgiveness*, 64.

Abusive Theology as Unbalanced

Abusive theologies of forgiveness are epistemologically unbalanced. Fraser Watts offers, 'theologically, the question of seeing God's creation in balanced terms is fundamental'.⁴⁰ Theologies that lack scriptural engagement and rely on psychological constructs or personal narratives can result in heresy, which is 'abusive' to one's relationship with God or the church. However, the imbalances in view in this article reflect an *underemphasis of context and experience* and an *overemphasis of Scripture and tradition*.

One ethical objection is that survivors may forgive to gain a spiritual or moral stature greater than their abuser(s).⁴¹ Moral philosophers rightly critique this motivation, and its antithesis, servility, whereby forgiveness is extended without regard for one's personal worth or dignity.⁴² These issues may be overlooked in ecclesial contexts wherein talk of obedience to divine initiative eclipses concern for yielding excessively. In the book, *The Statues Gaped* (2020), Sarah J. Chapman, chaplain, and Anna, childhood abuse survivor, co-authored their respective experiences of facilitating healing and recovering from childhood trauma. Anna described one roadblock as, 'Some Christians saying things such as, "if you don't forgive you won't be forgiven", can lead survivors of abuse to run as far away from God as possible'.⁴³

Forgiving 'those who trespass against us' – as Christians recite in the Lord's Prayer – is assumed uncritically to be the right thing to do. It is rarely questioned how it might be accomplished, or if forgiveness is possible or necessary. Indeed, talk of forgiveness in the church must not assume everyone has the capacity to forgive.⁴⁴ In contexts of traumatic injury it is unhelpful to equate the difficulty or 'costliness' of interpersonal forgiveness to God's forgiveness. Texts such as the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35 can result in the weaponising of Scripture when it is used to coerce survivors to forgive. For example, Anna reflects, 'Forgiveness can be used in quite abusive ways to survivors of abuse by some Christians ... without a survivor fully understanding the theology behind the statement'.⁴⁵

Theologizing with forgiveness can become abusive when an idealized archetype of Christian forgiveness emerges from 'a kind of objective science of faith'.⁴⁶ For example, R.T. Kendall refers to Jesus' words on the cross (Luke 23.34), to suggest the 'ultimate proof of total forgiveness takes place when we sincerely petition the Father to let those who have

⁴⁰ Watts, 'Christian', 52.

⁴¹ Poling, *Abuse*, 120.

⁴² Jeffrie G. Murphy, and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 17.

⁴³ Sarah J. Champan and Anna, *The Statues Gaped: A Testimony of Being Healed from Childhood Sexual Abuse Alongside the Experience of Facilitating Healing*, (Published Privately, 2020), 74.

⁴⁴ Anthony Bash, *Just Forgiveness: Exploring the Bible, Weighing the Issues* (London: SPCK, 2011), 77.

⁴⁵ Chapman and Anna, *Statues*, 74.

⁴⁶ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Revised edn, *Faith and Cultures* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 3.

hurt us off the hook'.⁴⁷ This type of unbalanced theologizing along with 'not telling what they did',⁴⁸ or accepting that the wrongdoer 'will be blessed without any consequences for their wrong [and] we begin to be a little more like Jesus, to change into the image of Christ'⁴⁹ are abusive in the context of CSA. Further, the reward of becoming more Christ-like by ignoring justice claims and excusing perpetrators are imitative of the dynamics of the original abuse. Miroslav Volf rightly identifies, 'there is nothing vengeful about the expectation of a punishment equivalent to the injury'.⁵⁰ Kendall's reflections might be revised by critiques which suggest that in Luke 23.34, Jesus was *offering a prayer* to the Father rather than offering absolution.⁵¹ Anthony Bash suggests that Jesus as the 'forgiving victim' modelled an ideal of forgiveness as non-exercise of power that is non-retaliatory and not vindictive.⁵²

Unbalanced theology can become abusive when ethical claims of justice are disavowed. For example, disqualifying victims of rape or child abuse from pursuing the perpetrator's punishment because they should not be the one 'to remove the speck from another's eye' (Matthew 7:5),⁵³ can lead to revictimization or recidivism. Survivors and perpetrators may be harmed when repentance or 'recompensing the victim for the crime committed'⁵⁴ are assumed as unnecessary for Christians. Abusive theology must be revised to minimize the risk of collusion in further abuse.⁵⁵

Reformed strands of theology that follow Barthian prioritization of theology leaves little room for revising principles that are abusive in the context of CSA. Coutts suggests the integration of social and psychological sciences take place in service of the ministry of reconciliation.⁵⁶ However, along with Jones, it is unclear how these are to be related in actual practice. Coutts affirms that Christian forgiveness located in a ministry of reconciliation does not mean 'restoration is a *means* by which *we* re-create communion'.⁵⁷ However, theologies – Barthian or otherwise – that subordinate other forms of knowledge are problematized when a concern for safeguarding theological commitments is prioritized over against safeguarding persons in concrete interaction. The potential for abusive theology to emerge in an ecclesial community in the way Coutts suggests occurs when parishioners ignore

⁴⁷ R. T. Kendall, *Total Forgiveness: True Inner Peace Awaits You!* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2002), 4.

⁴⁸ Kendall, *Total*, 23.

⁴⁹ Kendall, 20.

⁵⁰ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2005), 134.

⁵¹ Bash, *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics*, 92–93.

⁵² Bash, *Forgiveness*, 92, 93.

⁵³ Kendall, *Total*, 11.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Achtemeier, 'Victimization and Healing: The Biblical View', in Lisa Barnes Lampman and Michelle D. Shattuck (eds), *God and the Victim: Theological Reflections on Evil, Victimization, Justice, and Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 89–106 (105).

⁵⁵ Christiane Sanderson, 'The Role of Forgiveness After Interpersonal Abuse: Danger of Road to Recovery and Healing?', in Stephen Hance (ed.), *Forgiveness in Practice* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2019), 137–46 (140).

⁵⁶ Coutts, *Shared*, 171.

⁵⁷ Coutts, *Shared*, 172.

traumatic wounding and emphasise forgiveness or reconciliation uncritically without considering the survivors and perpetrators who must navigate or negotiate these ideals in practice.

Coutts distinguishes the church's role as 'discerningly cooperative in provisional systems of justice without being defined by them'.⁵⁸ Positively, this strikes a balance between ecclesial and civil authorities. Yet, Barthian theology affirms the church 'joins the societal pursuit of justice [by] taking greater responsibility for compassionate restoration of offender and offended alike'.⁵⁹ The potential for reinjury in practice emerges when the 'abused forgiver would be directed by Jesus' words'⁶⁰ to find an ecclesial community for accountability and discernment of false repentance.⁶¹ This assumes naively that a church has necessary safeguards in place to confront the entrenched denial of perpetrators 'no matter what the extent of enmity, addiction or trauma'.⁶²

Locating forgiveness theoretically in a ministry of reconciliation expresses openness towards recovering perpetrators and does not limit imagining what God's Spirit can accomplish by 'focusing on what is realistically possible'.⁶³ However, my argument is that prohibiting interdisciplinary dialogue and lived experience from informing what it means for Christians to forgive one another in theory may contribute to abusive ecclesial responses to persons in practice. An apt alternative, in my view, would be for theologizing that is open to reshaping by other sources of knowledge that take precedence depending on the context or issue. For example, the Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), is a programme whereby volunteers from a local community partner with criminal justice agencies to form a support group that balances a perpetrator's recovery needs whilst safeguarding survivors *and the community*.⁶⁴ Thus, theological reflection should include permeable epistemological borders to describe what forgiveness means for Christian discipleship in ways that safeguard persons at risk of being abused or committing abuse.

When forgiveness in Christian ministry welcomes reconciliation uncritically this imbalance can facilitate an environment for abuse. This is evidenced by the experience of one church's home-group welcoming a recovering perpetrator and their decision to forgive him.⁶⁵ The group's response caused confusion about the nature of forgiveness, since as non-victims, forgiveness was not theirs to offer in this context. Additionally, 'their response failed to understand sufficiently the nature of child abuse'.⁶⁶ Priddis concludes the church

⁵⁸ Coutts, *Shared*, 164.

⁵⁹ Coutts, *Shared*, 165.

⁶⁰ Coutts, *Shared*, 158.

⁶¹ Coutts, *Shared*, 158.

⁶² Coutts, *Shared*, 172.

⁶³ Jones, *Embodying*, 277.

⁶⁴ 'Website of the Circles of Support and Accountability', <https://www.circles-uk.org.uk/about-circles/purpose-and-values>, (accessed 29 Apr 2020).

⁶⁵ Priddis, *Forgiveness*, 31.

⁶⁶ Priddis, *Forgiveness*, 32.

members failed to be *responsibly suspicious*, which could put children in danger, and harm the perpetrator by not confronting, challenging, and correcting distorted thinking.⁶⁷

A Barthian ‘theory to practice’ approach⁶⁸ overemphasises Scripture and tradition at the expense of ‘human understanding, action, or practice in the construal of God’s self-disclosure’.⁶⁹ This may catalyse premature and even inappropriate forms of forgiveness in practice. As such, ‘the church’s primary concern should be the survivor’s process of healing – their existential safety, not their ecclesiological submission’.⁷⁰ The ethical implications of contextually nuanced understandings of forgiveness needs to be more descriptive.⁷¹ This requires critical interdisciplinary engagement and openness to revision by faithful practices, such as the CoSA, for discerning safe ‘boundaries and accountability structures’⁷² and ‘mutual accountability and confession’⁷³ or possibilities for reconciliation. One way forward might utilize a practice-theory-practice model⁷⁴ that tasks descriptive theology with offering a thick description⁷⁵ of how trauma complexifies speaking about forgiveness in ecclesial contexts. Next, Christian principles that trigger traumatic responses or diminish one’s capacity for forgiveness might be recast after reengaging Scripture and tradition. Finally, reimagined practises might emerge for the benefit of the church.

For example, some models of Christian forgiveness suggest beginning by narrating the story of hurt.⁷⁶ Volf offers, ‘forgiveness is to name the wrongdoing and to condemn it’,⁷⁷ which involves judgement in both condemning and sparing the doer.⁷⁸ However, some clergy persons in ecclesial contexts that lack safeguarding guidelines may not be equipped to receive a survivor’s story. Additionally, stages of forgiveness that require naming can be inadequate for those who keep silent due to worries regarding safety, the threat of shame or public scandal, or fears of being disbelieved.⁷⁹ These are problematized further when the alleged perpetrator is a parent, educator, or clergy person.

⁶⁷ Priddis, *Forgiveness*, 32.

⁶⁸ Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 150.

⁶⁹ Browning, *Fundamental*, 144.

⁷⁰ Paul C. Maxwell, ‘Betrayal Trauma and Covenant: Theologically Understanding Abuse Trauma and Traumatically Reforming Theological Understanding’, *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 19 (2017), 241–67 (258).

⁷¹ Browning, *Fundamental*, 96.

⁷² Coutts, *Shared*, 172.

⁷³ Coutts, *Shared*, 159.

⁷⁴ Browning, *Fundamental*, 41.

⁷⁵ Browning, *Fundamental*, 94.

⁷⁶ Desmond Tutu, and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 67–117.

⁷⁷ Volf, *Free*, 129.

⁷⁸ Volf, *Free*, 141.

⁷⁹ Karkošková, ‘Ethical’, 121.

Many of these issues have been addressed by the Church of England (CofE), with ecclesial resources for safeguarding,⁸⁰ and understanding and responding to abuse.⁸¹ Naming and locating blame are complex not only because criminal allegations could be involved, but also because traumatic injury may cause survivors to experience self-blame. Judith Herman identifies:

Participation in forbidden sexual activity confirms the abused child's sense of badness. If she experienced pleasure, enjoyed special attention, or used the sexual relationship to gain privileges, these sins are adduced as evidence of her innate wickedness. The profound sense of inner badness becomes the core around which the child's identity is formed and persists into adult life.⁸²

Thus, the dehumanizing experience of CSA causes many survivors to internalize shame and believe they are to blame for their own abasement. These internalizations are exacerbated by strands of Reformed theologies that emphasize human sinfulness as total depravity,⁸³ or claim that forgiveness involves repenting of a 'diminished self'.⁸⁴ CSA corrupts these meanings, triggering self-loathing in survivors or excuses by perpetrators to avoid blameworthiness. Additionally, when positive meaning is ascribed to all events because God has a sufficiently moral reason to allow everything,⁸⁵ this reinforces self-blame by survivors or denial by perpetrators who see themselves as instruments of God's providence. Similar abusive dynamics are at work when a perpetrator implies that a child 'made me do it'.

Theologizing with forgiveness requires attentiveness to trauma that understands talking about it can make it worse,⁸⁶ and that truthful narratives can shift over time.⁸⁷ Jones suggests narrating stories of trauma and oppression to remember the past 'truthfully *and well*'.⁸⁸ These are important aims, but it is important to note that telling the truth can retraumatize some people. As such, psychology is a necessary dialogue partner to safeguard various people at risk so they may remember *well*. For example, challenging self-blame by survivors or denial by perpetrators who excuse their actions is vital. Philosopher and psychiatrist Gerrit Glas identifies 'speechlessness' as a dynamic of evil acts that manifests as 'resistance to being fully expressed and witnessed'.⁸⁹ Thus, there are no words for survivors to narrate

⁸⁰ Church of England, 'Safeguarding: Policy and Practice Guidance', <https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/promoting-safer-church/policy-practice-guidance> (accessed 29 Apr 2020).

⁸¹ Church of England, 'Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Abuse', https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/forgivenessandreconciliation_0.pdf (accessed 29 Apr 2020).

⁸² Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, rev ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997), 104–5.

⁸³ Maxwell, 'Betrayal', 243.

⁸⁴ Jones, *Embodying*, 169.

⁸⁵ Maxwell, 'Betrayal', 243.

⁸⁶ Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel and Pastoral Care, *Theology Today* 68 (2011), 8–25 (17).

⁸⁷ Baldwin, *Trauma*, 9.

⁸⁸ Jones, *Embodying*, 237.

⁸⁹ Gerrit Glas, 'Elements of a Phenomenology of Evil and Forgiveness', in Nancy Nyquist Potter, *Trauma, Truth and Reconciliation: Healing Damaged Relationships, International Perspectives in Philosophy and Psychiatry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 171–202 (178).

the horrors of wrongdoing; for perpetrators there are no words because *there is no horror* – all is forgiven.

Jones' systematic theology locates forgiveness as a way of life in the church that participates in Christ, guided by the Spirit. However, the construal for relating psychology and theology in actual practice remains unclear. If as Jones suggests, forgiveness involves the ongoing learning of craft that is embodied through particular dispositions, and habits of thinking, feeling, and acting,⁹⁰ then trauma theories and other sources of knowledge of the human mind and behaviour must be invited to help inform forgiving practises. For example, in the context of CSA, the craft of forgiveness could include learning habits of self-esteem, coping with post-traumatic responses, or confronting denial and sexual addiction.

Fraser Watts has demonstrated how theology and psychology may be correlated in a way that does not subordinate either discourse's presuppositions.⁹¹ Yet, theologizing with forgiveness should move beyond mutually exclusive knowledge domains towards embracing concept migration⁹² in the context of CSA. For example, mutually critical conversations may be generative of new language aimed at restoring a survivor's sense of self-agency or forestalling a perpetrator's sense of contrived blamelessness. Alternatively, theology might also explore opportunities to donate knowledge to secular disciplines and their understandings of forgiveness.

The next section will turn to explore this particular aspect of interdisciplinary work, focusing particularly on Alistair McFadyen's research in *Bound to Sin* (2000). Additionally, brief sketches of lived experience as equal dialogue partner will be offered from childhood abuse survivor, Anna, and priest Sarah J. Chapman. These both point to the need for balanced dialogue that eschews the 'tyranny of experience ... and the tyranny of the text'.⁹³

Balancing the Interdisciplinary Dialogue

In many examples of interdisciplinary work, theology is typically on the receiving end as beneficiary. McFadyen makes an important contribution by testing the hypothesis of the theological language of original sin and its explanatory power for describing and understanding pathological dynamics in CSA and the Holocaust. Augustinian views of original sin might seem an odd dialogue partner, especially because it seems to hold CSA survivors responsible for what Sharon Lamb identifies as victims' 'choiceless choices'⁹⁴ – citing Betty Bardige in 'Reflective Thinking and Prosocial Awareness: Adolescents Face the Holocaust and Themselves' (1983).

⁹⁰ Jones, *Embodying*, 238.

⁹¹ Watts, 'Christian', 3.

⁹² Watts, 'Christian', 7.

⁹³ Zoe Bennett, *Using the Bible in Practical Theology: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Farnham, Surrey, England Ashgate, 2013), 5.

⁹⁴ Lamb, *Blame*, 37.

Yet, McFadyen intentionally chooses this extreme view of sin to test the ways in which ‘willing’ for a child becomes pathologically disoriented⁹⁵ and forms an abused identity in the context of CSA.⁹⁶ He aims to show how a child’s ‘willing’ functions and *chooses* to participate; yet, the dynamic that energizes willing is perpetually constrained in the way it operates⁹⁷, for example, by willing consent.⁹⁸ Thus, McFadyen argues that being compelled to participate in abuse through a ‘non-incapacitating binding of willing’⁹⁹ demonstrates that the child possesses ‘some personal power’,¹⁰⁰ which becomes conscripted into an abusive bond with the perpetrator even if she never sees him again.¹⁰¹ McFadyen’s point is that when children are sexually abused, they become trapped by the dynamics of abuse, such that willing is bound to sinful dynamics. Thus, the language of sin may have explanatory use for describing pathology¹⁰² or explaining long-term traumatic consequences in CSA survivors.

Baldwin objects strongly to traumatic wounding as ‘NOT ontology’,¹⁰³ and would object to McFadyen’s theory of bound willing. However, his project should not be dismissed because on balance, it holds perpetrators responsible and refutes excuses that cite past abuse or biologically determined factors. Moreover, McFadyen demonstrates that theologizing with sin might donate language to secular knowledge. Future research might bring McFadyen’s work into critical dialogue with psychology that pathologizes the fragmentation of identity. For example, Anna characterized her identity as ‘the adult and all the little parts’ of herself.¹⁰⁴ A psychological goal to integrate disordered personalities might be reshaped by theological reflections offered by Chapman, who observed,

Anna describes how she began to love all the parts of herself that had been formed in the trauma of her abuse. The way in which Anna did this is not the only way to live with dissociated parts; others have found different ways ... so the parts have a new identity in common that replaces shared memories of abuse with a new relationship with Jesus.¹⁰⁵

Paul C. Maxwell also suggests opportunities for mutually critical engagement between Reformed theology and betrayal trauma theory (BTT), by exploring how ‘the Reformed covenant concept makes sense of the data behind BTT’,¹⁰⁶ and how Reformed theology might be revised in light of trauma research.¹⁰⁷ Maxwell identifies apparent dangers

⁹⁵ McFadyen, *Bound*, 127.

⁹⁶ McFadyen, *Bound*, 61.

⁹⁷ McFadyen, *Bound*, 125.

⁹⁸ McFadyen, *Bound*, 124.

⁹⁹ McFadyen, *Bound*, 110.

¹⁰⁰ McFadyen, *Bound*, 183.

¹⁰¹ McFadyen, *Bound*, 69.

¹⁰² McFadyen, *Bound*, 124.

¹⁰³ Baldwin, *Trauma*, 27.

¹⁰⁴ Chapman and Anna, *Statues*, 46.

¹⁰⁵ Chapman and Anna, *Statues*, 46.

¹⁰⁶ Maxwell, ‘Betrayal’, 244.

¹⁰⁷ Maxwell, ‘Betrayal’, 254.

Reformed theology has for trauma survivors.¹⁰⁸ His work coupled with Baldwin's trauma-sensitive theology are two important dialogue partners for future interdisciplinary research, that are vital to reformed ecclesiology.¹⁰⁹ For example, survivors' testimonies of growing up in horror or the inner pain of recovering perpetrators¹¹⁰ are important sources of knowledge to inform theology regarding the limits and possibilities of human forgiveness. Maxwell argues rightly this requires 'epistemic humility as a methodological necessity'.¹¹¹ Thus, theologizing in ways that adapt to the tensions between the lived experience of trauma and dogmatic expression of the Christian faith are needed to prevent abusive theology.

So far, this article has explored the ways in which some Reformed theologies of forgiveness are inadequate or harmful for the context of CSA. I have suggested collaborative interdisciplinary work as one helpful approach to preventing abusive theology. The question for Christian ministry is, *How might theologizing about forgiveness be reshaped by epistemologies of trauma and theological reflection on lived experience to prevent abusive theology and safeguard certain persons at risk?* I now turn to sketch how reimagining a vernacular of forgiveness to include nuanced concepts, metaphors, or words might proceed.

Reimagining Forgiveness

Maxwell suggests that like missionaries who translate the Bible into previously unwritten languages, Reformed theologians need to learn a new language for the benefit of trauma survivors.¹¹² I would add that these theologians might not only learn, but also co-create nuanced words and meanings for survivors *and* perpetrators. For example, Brendan Geary has written about theological metaphors used in the care of sex offenders.¹¹³ Resurrection narratives are employed creatively whereby recovering perpetrators identified redemption scripts of the 'old me' and the 'new me'.¹¹⁴ Here, trauma theories and moral philosophy are necessary dialogue partners to critique the theological ontology of the 'new 'me' because recidivism is probable – most recovering perpetrators will need counselling for the rest of their lives.¹¹⁵

Reimagining forgiveness from a Christian perspective in the context of CSA must include both interdisciplinary and *intra*-disciplinary work within the domain of theology. Therefore, we need not abandon tradition, textual or historical-critical methods, but rather bring these in creative conversation with secular disciplines and lived experience. For example, in the

¹⁰⁸ Maxwell, 'Betrayal', 242.

¹⁰⁹ Maxwell, 'Betrayal', 255.

¹¹⁰ Poling, *Abuse*, 54.

¹¹¹ Maxwell, 'Betrayal', 257.

¹¹² Maxwell, 'Betrayal', 258.

¹¹³ Brendan Geary, 'Resurrection Themes in the Care of Sex Offenders', *Practical Theology* 3 (2010), 9–22.

¹¹⁴ Geary, 'Resurrection', 16.

¹¹⁵ Lamb, *Blame*, 82.

New Testament, *aphesis*, can be translated as forgiveness, and indicates when something is 'left behind, abandoned, let go, or released'.¹¹⁶ '*Aphesis* is about liberation at the deepest personal level; it is not about exoneration from moral shortcomings'.¹¹⁷ These meanings find resonance with themes of therapeutic forgiveness interventions aimed at helping people to 'let go' of unwanted emotions, thoughts, or behaviours. Thus, one way to begin reimagining theologizing with forgiveness is to acknowledge that being part of God's *aphesis* 'includes the moral transformation of human relationships and society; it is not just to put right particular acts of wrongdoing on a person-to-person basis'.¹¹⁸

Thus, *aphesis* might be cast as a Spirit-energized process of leaving behind that which oppresses. Forgiveness for survivors or recovering perpetrators could include the process of psychic release or somatic healing from what holds them captive and releases them for possibilities of fruitful relationships. '*Aphesis* is much more than simply about forgiveness: it also denotes release and freedom from what constrains people – whether from sin and its effects [or] from physical oppression or captivity'.¹¹⁹

My argument follows an idea offered by Anthony Bash, which suggests forgiveness for survivors and perpetrators is a response to the 'aphetic ministry' of the Gospel that brings freedom to people.¹²⁰ The notion of release from bondage is located in God's *forgiveness of sins, which is another way of saying 'return from exile'*.¹²¹ N. T. Wright suggests forgiveness is the new reality and ongoing power of divine revolution against the old order of things: '*a new way of being human* has been launched'.¹²² This includes enacting forgiveness without specific reference to the word *aphesis* and its cognates¹²³ or experiencing a personal 'return from exile'.¹²⁴ Thus, survivors and recovering perpetrators might embody – albeit differently – forgiveness as liberation that energizes ongoing release from the powers of darkness. For example, one response to God's liberating initiative is forgoing the abused identity¹²⁵. Anna describes her experience included discovering, 'the Anna that God created, not the Anna that had been abused'.¹²⁶

Forgiveness might be reimagined from a Christian perspective as the practical outworking of the ongoing instantiation of God's revolution over the kingdoms and dark forces of this world.¹²⁷ Chapman observes, 'Each part of the person in their own unique way

¹¹⁶ Watts, 'Christian', 54

¹¹⁷ Watts, 'Christian', 55.

¹¹⁸ Bash, *Ethics*, 177.

¹¹⁹ Bash, *Ethics*, 90.

¹²⁰ Anthony Bash, conceives of 'aphetic' as grammatical modifier, email correspondence 10 January 2020.

¹²¹ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 2 (London: SPCK, 1996), 268.

¹²² N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began* (New York: Harper One, 2016), 385.

¹²³ Wright, *Victory*, 273.

¹²⁴ Wright, *Victory*, 273.

¹²⁵ McFadyen, *Bound*, 125.

¹²⁶ Chapman and Anna, *Statues*, 21.

¹²⁷ Bash, *Ethics*, 90.

learns about the love of Christ and feels something of the light that can dispel the darkness...'.¹²⁸ Thus, one way that survivors might describe what it means to forgive perpetrators and the wrongdoing of child sexual abuse could include their ongoing participation with the Holy Spirit in God's transforming work that engenders a 'letting go' of unhelpful post-traumatic responses.¹²⁹

Letting Go

Next, forgiveness might be parsed further through mutually critical dialogue with the lived experience of letting go. Empirical research with survivors must investigate questions like Anna's: 'How do you let go? What happens? How does it go?'¹³⁰ The answers to these questions are important sources of knowledge to inform theologies of forgiveness and to reimagine a nuanced vernacular in this context. For example, Anna described 'God's meaning of forgiveness' as a choice and process of letting go of feeling responsible, control, lies her abusers told her, pain of the memories, ambitions, and people'.¹³¹ Here, forgiveness might also be described as liberation from that which got 'stalled or stuck in the experience of traumatic exposure'.¹³²

In ecclesial contexts, forgiveness and CSA could be spoken of using words or phrases that connote the idea of forgoing. This might include forgiving as 'going without' unhelpful coping mechanisms used to survive the traumatic experience or forgiving that forgoes self-blame or denial. A more obvious example is forgoing hatred or a desire for vengeance, but as Fraser Watts explains, 'forgiveness involves a degree of cognitive reframing of the sources of estrangement'.¹³³ For survivors and perpetrators, the issue of forgiveness can involve forgoing self-hatred or shame. Baldwin identifies that 'wounding can occur when part of who we are is exiled by ... life experiences that fundamentally challenge our belief of who we are or how the world works'.¹³⁴ Survivors might see forgiveness as a return from exile for the outcasted parts of identity that split off in response to trauma so that the child could survive. Further areas to explore are convergences of liberation as an overarching theme of the biblical narrative. Images of returning from exile might be used to talk about integrating aspects of identity sequestered by dissociation.

¹²⁸ Chapman and Anna, *Statues*, 46.

¹²⁹ Baldwin, *Trauma*, 30.

¹³⁰ Chapman and Anna, *Statues*, 73.

¹³¹ Chapman and Anna, *Statues*, 73–82.

¹³² Baldwin, *Trauma*, 30.

¹³³ Watts, 'Christian', 50.

¹³⁴ Baldwin, *Trauma*, 4.

Implications for Christian Ministry

As this article turns towards its conclusion, I offer two inclinations for Christian ministry along 'aphetic'¹³⁵ lines of thinking and practice that reflect release and freedom.¹³⁶ The closing section of this article involves two points. First, to safeguard persons when theologizing with forgiveness new constructs must emerge for the context of CSA. The *Surviving Church* website suggests:

We feel the need of a new theology of forgiveness ... The old promises that link the right words with receiving forgiveness from God does not seem to work anymore. Whatever is true in this area needs to be re-expressed with a fresh nuance or qualification that it does not have at present. What the Church teaches about confession, repentance and forgiveness constantly needs to be revisited and restated.¹³⁷

Theologizing with forgiveness must be balanced to safeguard people from abusive theology. It is vital not to mimic abusive dynamics that silence certain voices. Additionally, dialogue with the classics and tradition must continue to critique contemporary social, cultural, and ecclesial practices.¹³⁸ New approaches to interpreting old texts should include a hermeneutical lens of trauma to give existing words new meanings that reshape what it means to forgive in this context.

The CoFE has taken actionable steps in this direction, including theologizing with the Gospel and sexual abuse,¹³⁹ and responding to questions for how to speak of forgiveness to those who have committed or experienced abuse.¹⁴⁰ Research reveals survivors prefer recognizing 'the struggle to forgive',¹⁴¹ which lends credibility to the need for reimagining the vernacular of forgiveness – ossified meanings and contaminated words often reinforce this 'struggle'. Trauma creates a crisis of language¹⁴² such that doctrines and principles of Christian forgiveness need fresh expression to reconstruct new theological meanings adequate for the issues of CSA.¹⁴³

¹³⁵ Bash, email communication.

¹³⁶ Anthony Bash, 'The Freedom Imperative', 26 June 2020, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/26-june/faith/faith-features/the-freedom-imperative> (accessed 24 February 2021).

¹³⁷ Stephen Parsons, 'Repentance and Forgiveness. A Lenten Reflection', 4 March 2020, Website of the Surviving Church, <http://survivingchurch.org/2020/03/04/repentance-and-forgiveness-a-lenten-reflection/> (accessed 27 April 2020).

¹³⁸ Browning, *Fundamental*, 93.

¹³⁹ Church of England, 'The Gospel, Sexual Abuse, and the Church', <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/theologicalresourcefcaocweb.pdf> (accessed 26 April 2020).

¹⁴⁰ Church of England, 'Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Abuse', https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/forgivenessandreconciliation_0.pdf (accessed 26 Apr 2020).

¹⁴¹ Church of England, 'Forgiveness', 87.

¹⁴² Robert Vosloo, 'Traumatic Memory, Representation and Forgiveness: Some Remarks in Conversation with Antjie Krog's Country of My Skull,' *In die Skriflig*, 46 (2012), 1–7 (4).

¹⁴³ Joyce Mercer, 'Interdisciplinarity as a Practical Theological Conundrum' in Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, and Joyce Mercer (eds), *Conundrums in Practical Theology* (Boston: Brill, 2016), 163–89 (167).

A good place to start might broaden options for communicating ‘what happened’ beyond privatized dialogical exchange, including sharing trauma-narratives with a supportive presence of the ecclesial body.¹⁴⁴ Additional opportunities could include critical engagement with literary texts, to clarify theological responses.¹⁴⁵ Robert Vosloo identifies Antjie Krog’s poetry in *Country of My Skull* (1998), as a hermeneutic vehicle modelling hurt and apology that offers new understanding of pleas for forgiveness.¹⁴⁶ Similarly, literary texts might be engaged to express and represent traumatic memory,¹⁴⁷ or survivors’ stories like Anna’s might help to co-create nuanced meanings of existing words.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, art forms used by therapists working with children to facilitate expression of abuse in pictorial form,¹⁴⁹ could offer possibilities for adult-survivors in narrating trauma. These alternative modes of expression liberate the processing of traumatic memory from strictly verbal modes and preserve memories of wrongdoing without threat of erasure. Thus, literature and the arts might offer ways to truthfully (genuinely) express terror, hurt, anger, remorse, or forgiveness that is limited by a failure of language.¹⁵⁰

My second inclination for moving forward follows Maxwell who argues, ‘trauma survivors require work done in another language’¹⁵¹ because certain theological concepts are not cognitively decodable from trauma.¹⁵² One starting point might begin with an existing theory that can be reshaped and contextualized. For example, Jones’ theory of embodying forgiveness as a craft sketches forgiveness as a lifelong unlearning of sin,¹⁵³ and learning of specific habits under the guidance of exemplars.¹⁵⁴ Here, the unlearning of sin could be expressed as forgoing self-blame or denial. New forgiving practises and words to describe them might be informed by future action research with scholars, survivors, and recovering perpetrators. As intra/interdisciplinary work unfolds it is vital to acknowledge that various cultures or future generations may adapt different language as ‘words do not always have fixed meanings; we *give* them meanings that can vary with culture, context, or time.’¹⁵⁵

Additionally, it is important to recognize that the potential for abusive dynamics exists for those whose perpetrator was a clergy person. Other exemplars are needed that extend beyond the church such as secular psychologists, support groups, or non-ecclesial mentors.

¹⁴⁴ Jones, *Embodying*, 187.

¹⁴⁵ Vosloo, ‘Traumatic’, 1.

¹⁴⁶ Vosloo, ‘Traumatic’, 4.

¹⁴⁷ Vosloo, ‘Traumatic’, 2.

¹⁴⁸ Vosloo, ‘Traumatic’, 3.

¹⁴⁹ Steven R. Tracy, *Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse*, 1st edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 94.

¹⁵⁰ Vosloo, ‘Traumatic’, 4.

¹⁵¹ Maxwell, ‘Betrayal’, 257.

¹⁵² Maxwell, ‘Betrayal’, 258.

¹⁵³ Jones, *Embodying*, xii.

¹⁵⁴ Jones, *Embodying*, 226–27.

¹⁵⁵ Bash, *Remorse*, 17.

The concept of a learning a theological craft must not be relegated to those with position or authority in the academy or church. Survivors and recovering perpetrators should serve as experts of the craft. As such, experts in the academy or clergy might be apprenticed to these habits by observing and learning from the thinking and faithful practices of survivors who are learning to let go. These practices might then be infused *mutatis mutandis* in ecclesial teaching, preaching, or liturgy with the necessary safeguards in place.

Conclusion

This article has argued that theologizing with forgiveness can become abusive theology without collaborative interdisciplinary dialogue and the lived experience of survivors or recovering perpetrators. Abusive theology has the potential to cause harm when inadequate theological imperatives ignore the complexities of forgiving the wrongdoing and the wrongdoer. Scholars will need to wrestle with conundrums related to variations in horizons of meaning and develop 'improvisational expertise [as] the kind of expert practical knowledge'.¹⁵⁶ Thus, rather than attentiveness to doctrine and language aimed solely at maintaining tradition, research may only fruitfully proceed by eschewing judgments of, 'this is forgiveness, but that is not'.¹⁵⁷

Theories about what it means to forgive must not catalyse revictimization or recidivism nor risk indictment of Christian forgiveness as an accomplice to abuse. A new vernacular germane to the Gospel as an 'aphetic ministry'¹⁵⁸ must emerge not only to safeguard survivors and perpetrators, but all people in solidarity with the ongoing revolution of God's Kingdom manifesto that declares, 'release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4.18b–19).

¹⁵⁶ Mercer, 'Interdisciplinarity', 173.

¹⁵⁷ Anthony Bash, 'Forgiveness and Christianity', in Stephen Hance (ed.), *Forgiveness in Practice* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 2019). 20.

¹⁵⁸ Bash, email communication.