

From Enmity to Reconciliation

Reflections on the Theology of Vernon White and Forgiveness Research of Marina Cantacuzino

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Abstract

The journey leading from enmity to reconciliation is beset with complex challenges for parishioners en route and for pastors offering guidance. Concepts and principles are selected from the theology of Vernon White, the forgiveness research of Marina Cantacuzino, and theologies of other authors, which may prove helpful. Two major issues are considered here: 1) reconciling with each other, involving offering and receiving forgiveness, and 2) reconciling with God. These are examined theologically and practically to include differences and connections between forgiveness and reconciliation, theodicy (particularly instrumentalism), freewill, strategies for counseling, and common parishioner concerns with possible pastoral responses to them.

Keywords

Reconciliation, Forgiveness, White, Cantacuzino, theodicy, Freewill, Instrumentalism

Introduction

Physical violence and emotional conflict are endemic to the human condition, but in today's world they seem especially severe, made evident by nonstop media coverage of social-political upheaval aggravated by the COVID epidemic and, most recently, the war of aggression against Ukraine. This enmity has given rise to increased calls for ending division and discord. These appeals are reflected in Scripture, as well, where resolving our conflicts peaceably and surmounting our divergences from God's will are central concerns. Theology and ministry of reconciliation address these concerns, of which two are central to this article: *humans reconciling with each other*, involving offering and receiving forgiveness, and *humans reconciling with God*. These involve transformative change, which is difficult and



often unrealized in this world. Consider, for example, two protestors on opposite sides of an issue, one permanently disabling the other in a physical assault. The passage to reconciliation, as conceived here, includes forgiveness offered by the victim and received by the offender. This will likely incur difficulty and uncertainty, which both victim and offender may oppose. They may be unwilling or hesitant to begin the trek, let alone see it through (in this world). Or consider the large number of COVID deaths in our time. Sufferers, survivors, and their loved ones may hold God ultimately responsible for the pandemic, thereby finding themselves angry and unwilling to reconcile with God. Although forgiveness and reconciliation in our imperfect world are sometimes irresolvable, inadvisable, or counterproductive, especially if forced or premature, they can also bring about the liberating power of transformation, however limited, providing a foretaste of the 'new earth' ahead (Is. 65.17). In view of such challenges, I am encouraged by the insights I found in the theology of Vernon White, the journalism of Marina Cantacuzino, and the theologies of other scholars, chiefly Anthony Bash, Stephen Hance, and Anthony Priddis.¹ Their insights are outlined below under five main headings:

1. Preliminary Sketch of Forgiveness and Reconciliation offers an initial description of these terms before a later more detailed look.
2. White's Theology—Humans Reconciling with Each Other.
3. White's Theology—Humans Reconciling with God.
4. Counseling Strategies for Forgiveness & Reconciliation
5. En Route to Healing and On Toward Abundant Life with God and Neighbor recaps prior elements of forgiveness and reconciliation person-to-person, and our reconciliation with God. Related concerns of parishioners and possible pastoral responses to them follow.

Preliminary Sketch of Forgiveness & Reconciliation

Forgiveness and reconciliation can be treated as separate subjects but are sometimes considered as part of the same topic. Forgiveness alone is considered first, then interconnected with reconciliation.

The meaning of *forgiveness* in particular is debated over a sizable volume of literature. A central issue is whether it should be offered conditionally or not. Sometimes doing so is impossible, as when the offender is dead. Stephen Hance, for example, looks at what forgiveness should entail even if never received by the wrongdoer. He views forgiveness

¹ Vernon P. White is currently Visiting Professor of Theology at Kings College London. Marina Cantacuzino is a UK journalist and writer. Anthony Bash is Honorary Fellow and Professor of Theology and Religion at Durham University. Stephen J. Hance is a British Anglican priest and currently National Lead for Evangelism and Witness for the Church of England. Anthony Priddis is a British Anglican priest and former Bishop, now an honorary assistant bishop in Gloucester and Worcester dioceses.

fundamentally as ‘inner peace-making.’² It involves admitting the hurt occurred and confronting its effect honestly, including its long-term consequences, offering forgiveness knowingly without any disposition for revenge, moral advantage, or obligation, and, for some believers, requesting divine assistance, ‘. . . remembering the forgiveness of God which one has experienced oneself.’³

Other theologians frame reconciliation as part of forgiveness as its end goal. Anthony Priddis, for example, pictures forgiveness into two phases: *offering* forgiveness and *receiving* forgiveness, with reconciliation as the ‘final stage’ of the latter.⁴ He posits that receiving forgiveness, the offender’s role, involves seven principles: *recognition*, *responsibility*, *remorse*, *repentance*, *restitution*, *resolve*, and *reconciliation*.⁵ Priddis acknowledges that reconciliation is not possible under all circumstances, but when both victim and victimizer want to walk the difficult journey together it is possible. Reconciliation can be realized to various extents, but at its fullest the damaged or fractured relationship is restored, healed, and ‘made one.’ Here Priddis references William Tyndale’s struggle in the 16th century to find an English term that corresponds to the Hebrew meaning, finally creating a new word *atonement*, literally *at-one-ment*. Noting Paul’s thinking in 2 Cor. 5:17–20, Priddis views full reconciliation as being one with God and with one another, a “new creation.”⁶ He states: “The reconciled life is one that is possible because of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, but it needs each of us to receive the offered gift and walk the path of forgiveness, both as ones who receive forgiveness but also as ones who offer it when we ourselves are wronged.”⁷

Anthony Bash also inserts *reconciliation* within ‘a framework of forgiveness,’ composed of five features, his ‘forgiveness quintet.’⁸ It ‘takes account of *justice* in the context of a deliberate and directed *response* to a wrongdoer’s *repentance* about a *morally reprehensible* act that can lead to a *restored relationship*.’⁹ Bash additionally stresses the link between reconciliation and *justification* in Paul’s writing where all who are *in Christ* are ‘reconciled’ with God, our sins forgiven, ‘so that we might have the righteous of God’ (2 Cor. 5:17–21; Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:20).¹⁰ (As soon evident, this thinking is central to White’s theology of reconciliation as *atonement*.) Bash believes that all five features shape

² Stephen Hance, “A Pastor Looks at Forgiveness,” in Stephen Hance (ed), *Forgiveness in Practice* (London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019), 135.

³ Hance, “A Pastor Looks at Forgiveness,” 135.

⁴ Anthony Priddis, *Forgiveness: A Practical and Pastoral Companion* (Norfolk: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2019) 2, 83.

⁵ Priddis, *Forgiveness*, 83–99.

⁶ Priddis, *Forgiveness*, 120–21.

⁷ Priddis, *Forgiveness*, 121.

⁸ Anthony Bash, *Just Forgiveness: Exploring the Bible, Weighing the Issues* (London: SPCK, 2011), 29. Bash explains each of the five features on pages 29–34.

⁹ Bash, *Just Forgiveness*, 34.

¹⁰ Bash, *Just Forgiveness*, 106–7.

'forgiveness in its most well rounded, productive form.'¹¹ In practice, of course, as in cases of abuse, reconciliation between victim and offender can be ill-advised, unworkable, or even abusive, as too forgiveness itself.¹²

Bash has also conducted a careful study of the meanings of forgiveness in the New Testament, revealing complexity in the authors' interpretation and emphasis.¹³ There are, for example, two general ideas of forgiveness expressed by more than one Greek word. One, according to Paul, is as a '*gift*' (*charizoma*), whether from God or person-to-person. As a gift the wrongdoer can neither earn nor expect forgiveness. In Matthew, however, forgiveness is our '*moral duty*,' having already received transformative forgiveness from God. The other main idea of forgiveness is 'letting go,' at minimum releasing resentment and revenge against the wrongdoer or dismissing the wrongdoer's sin or debt. The Greek words *aphiemi* (verb) and *aphesis* (noun) can denote forgiveness for sin or cancellation of debt.

This complexity and the paucity of what is actually said about forgiveness in the New Testament may help explain the widely held opinion that forgiveness cannot be defined precisely.¹⁴ For example, Bash states that 'Forgiveness is too complex and too elusive to define accurately.'¹⁵ After looking carefully at its meaning biblically and elsewhere, he concludes that forgiveness is a '*spectrum*' of responses, from the most complex to the least complex, '*thick forgiveness*' to '*thin forgiveness*,' and of such variety that the word '*forgivenesses*' may be helpful.¹⁶ In a later essay, Bash argues that Wittgenstein's term '*family resemblance*' may help avoid 'absurd' and 'judgmental' dismissals of others' 'forgivenesses.'¹⁷

Marina Cantacuzino is also reluctant to pin down a particular definition of forgiveness. She notes that when it comes to contemplating and enacting forgiveness in our own lives, complex, multi-faceted, and ambiguous realities are revealed, unique to each person and context, often leading to confusion, misunderstanding, and unnecessary resistance.¹⁸

¹¹ Bash, *Just Forgiveness*, 33.

¹² See for example, Anthony Bash, 'Forgiveness and Christianity,' in Stephen Hance (ed), *Forgiveness in Practice* (London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019), 35; Jennifer Loop, "Preventing Abusive Theology," *Theology and Ministry* 7 2021, 75–93; Owen D. May, "Forgiveness is Not the Answer," *Theology and Ministry* 7 2021, 94–104.

¹³ Bash, *Just Forgiveness*, 41–114.

¹⁴ Bash, *Just Forgiveness*, 13.

¹⁵ Bash, *Just Forgiveness*, 35.

¹⁶ Bash, *Just Forgiveness*, 37–39.

¹⁷ Bash, "Forgiveness and Christianity," 29.

¹⁸ Marina Cantacuzino, *The Forgiveness Project: Stories for a Vengeful Age* (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015 and 2016), 2–3.

White's Theology—Humans Reconciling with Each Other

I begin my outline of White's theology with the issue of *humans reconciling with each other*, involving two theses: *reconciliation as re-creation*¹⁹ and *Christ equipped to guide us to full reconciliation without coercion*, proposed in his book *Atonement and Incarnation*.²⁰

Reconciling with Each Other as Re-creation

Key to understanding White's concept of *reconciliation* is as a 'new creation,' made clear in Paul's vivid phrasing:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5.17–20, NRSV).²¹

In this passage Paul conceives of God's saving work as a '*new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!*' and '*in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.*'²² We are also 'entreated' to *reconcile with God*. This suggests to me that God's reconciliation with us, including *forgiveness* of our sins and our reconciling with God, is *not restoration* of a past prior to evil, but *re-creation* of past evil into something appreciably new and able to surmount that evil. Pre-eminently is the transformation of Christ's innocent death into resurrection. More generally, White states, 'God's reaction (to our sin) does not purport to return us to the original Eden; we are en route for a redeemed creation, a new heaven and new earth.'²³ As 'summed up in William Temple's dictum, ... sin must be "transformed by the new context of the future."²⁴

Although we cannot do all that God does, this hints that our own forgivenesses and reconciliations *if authentic* are also 'new creations' 're-created' out of past evils. In fact, our world's linear timeframe moves in one direction, toward the future, and cannot be reversed to restore the past exactly, what Arendt calls "the predicament of irreversibility."²⁵ It is noteworthy, therefore, that in our world when an offense occurs between two or more people the desire to right the wrong usually looks to 'restoring' desired circumstances prior to the offense. In the case of material objects, fixing what was broken or replacing what was stolen may be agreeable to both victim and offender, though the original object in its initial

¹⁹ I have substituted the spelling "re-creation" for "recreation" to eliminate any mis-association with leisure activity.

²⁰ Vernon P. White, *Atonement and Incarnation: An Essay in Universalism and Particularity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, digital 2008).

²¹ White, *Atonement*, 87–106.

²² See also Rom. 5.10; Col. 1.20

²³ White, *Atonement*, 97.

²⁴ White, *Atonement*, 103.

²⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), 212.

condition is absent. But what about human beings suffering physical impairment, psychological harm, or loss, as in severe injury or death, particularly when it affects loved ones and or multiple people? Then healing the hurt and recovering the loss are only partial or impossible in crucial ways. The protestor's body once permanently disabled cannot be restored to its original condition, nor can the psychological history of the protestor be reversed. Desirable change is better attained through 're-creative logic,' rather than 'restorative logic.' That is, rather than aiming to restore the ability before permanent damage, better aim to re-create from it (or along with it) a new ability, or abilities, and or surrounding circumstances greater in meaning and import than the disability. Of course, there is no guarantee of success in this world. Here too it may be partial or none. But the potential for positive change can be significant, as when through forgiveness and reconciliation the two protestors work toward mutual healing, perhaps extending their shared efforts to anti-violent activism, for example.

A frequently sought corrective applying restorative logic is *retribution*.²⁶ After an analysis of retribution within its larger context of *punishment*,²⁷ White posits this specific meaning: 'Retributive reaction to an offense is good, and has meaning, in so far as it harmonizes, corrects imbalance, and restores order ... in terms of the overall standards, structures, and fabric of the moral universe.'²⁸ Retribution within the justice system tries to 'restore the balance of benefits and burdens' between victim and offender prior to the offense through 'penal redistribution' of those benefits and burdens, literally or symbolically. For example, stolen money benefits the offender whereas it burdens the victim, but when the offender is forced to return the stolen amount to the victim, possibly with additional compensation for inconvenience or suffering, equivalent suffering is imposed on the offender. The earlier benefit-burden balance is restored. Other associated terms include 'just deserts,' 'due punishment,' 'pay back,' 'reparation,' and 'balancing the scales.'²⁹

But, of course, we are faced here with the same problem of recovering the past – in this instance an equal balance of burdens that cannot be restored exactly. Briefly consider this in relation to our two protestors from *practical*, *moral*, and *theological* perspectives:

- *Practically*, the original state of affairs cannot be rebalanced precisely. Thus, whatever personal relationship the two protestors may have had can never be the same, even if mended and improved in the future.

²⁶ White, *Atonement*, 91–105.

²⁷ For example: Sir Walter Mobley, *The Ethics of Punishment* (London: Faber, 1969).

²⁸ White, *Atonement*, 94.

²⁹ White, *Atonement*, 95–96.

- *Morally*, balancing the suffering caused by the protestor's assault with an 'equivalent' suffering for the assaulter, though intuitively moral within the retributive system, does not itself make things right between the two.³⁰
- *Theologically*, this balancing of suffering does not deal with the sin itself, in a direct and redeeming way.

To do better in all three respects new positive consequences must be re-created out of the assault, which transforms its significance, thereby 'dealing' with it more effectively. If the victim and offender are truly and fully reconciled, the enmity between them is resolved. The resolution is worked on together and the outcome is mutually agreed to. As a result, the original offense takes on new meaning and significance. Moreover, by collaborating in their reconciliation the victim and offender are transformed in their respective roles: from *victim* to *agent* and from *offender* to *agent for good* in this instance. A question for our two protestors will be whether forgiveness and reconciliation are realistic or advisable for them, at least initially.

Christ Equipped to Guide Us to Full Reconciliation Without Coercion

A major focus of White's theology is how God in Christ through the incarnation is 'equipped' to take his re-creative activity throughout the whole universe. White understands this in relation to David Brown's preferred analogy of our conscious and subconscious selves in his book *The Divine Trinity*: '[our] conscious and subconscious selves accept workings from each other without destroying their respective natures.'³¹ From this standpoint the incarnation involves the mutual sharing of divine and human experiences to the maximum compatible with the divine and human natures without destroying either nature. Being directly affected by human experiences Christ is the subject of them, similar to our being the subject of our physical pains, though the divine nature transforms them through a wider perspective. White states,

Conceived in this way the incarnation provides a mode of knowing and experiencing absorbed at a point in human history, to inform the eternal divine nature and omniscience. The eternal God is thus "equipped" through incarnation in his saving enterprise.³²

To aid in explanation, White employs the analogy of a 'mountain guide,' to 'flesh out' how God in Christ is 'equipped' to lead us along the challenging passage to our redemption without infringing on our liberty. This analogy appears within the initial explanation of White's 'embryo' atonement model:

³⁰ See for example the essay on 'retributive desert,' Jeffrie G. Murphy, 'Last Words on Retribution', in Jonathan Jacobs and Jonathan Jackson (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Criminal Justice Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 28–41.

³¹ David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (London: Duckworth, 1985), 264.

³² White, *Atonement*, 77.

A particular act could constitute universal redeeming possibilities because it equips the agent with certain qualities or experiences, which “qualify” him to relate more effectively to the objects of his action. More specifically, it qualifies him to engage in the full meaning and demands of reconciliation; included within that is the capacity to elicit change within personal agents, whatever their experience, and without violating their freedom. Thus, God in Christ takes into his own divine experience that which qualifies him to reconcile, redeem and sanctify in his relationship with all people everywhere. *To adapt one of Fiddes’ pictures: it is something like the mountain guide who first crosses a difficult terrain himself, in order to equip him to take across all who will follow him.* It is a journey we could not make apart from him yet must make. It is, of course, the journey of dying to self and living wholly to God—through temptation, suffering, and death itself.³³

In point:

- Through the *incarnation* Christ takes into divine experience our human experience, subjected to all its temptations, suffering, and death, and defeating death, transforming them through a wider divine perspective—the *Christ event*.
- In so doing Christ is *equipped* with certain experiences and characteristics that enable him to guide us personally in living out our lives (crossing the difficult terrain) toward redemption. This *equipping* enables Christ to elicit change in us to *freely* follow him to turn away from *self-centeredness* and devote our lives to God, amid temptation, suffering, and death.³⁴

Accordingly, our two protesters have a ‘mountain guide’ to assist them up the steep slopes through forgiveness to reconciliation—no forced climbing.

But given the imperfect resolve and inclinations of human beings, is granting us freewill realistic, whether in this world or the next? I have found in White’s writing three ways Christ lures us to freely follow his lead on the rough road toward redemption: ‘moral authority’³⁵ (White’s term), ‘interpersonal causality,’ and ‘incorporative causality’ (my terms).³⁶

White summarizes the criterion of Christ’s ‘moral authenticity’ as follows: ‘unless and until God himself has experienced suffering, death, and the temptation to sin, and overcome them, as a human individual, he has no moral authority to overcome them in and with the rest of humanity.’³⁷ White does not break down this criterion for moral authority into more specific criteria. However, I see three. One is by *taking responsibility* for his creation as it is, personally sharing our human reality, birth to death, as a particular human being Jesus of Nazareth. It includes being tempted to sin and experiencing a sense of God’s abandonment (Mk 15.34). This is no matter of simple awareness, sympathy, or even

³³ White, *Atonement*, 53. Emphasis added.

³⁴ White employs two terms ‘dying to self’ and ‘dying to self-centeredness.’ I prefer the latter to help avoid the unfortunate notion of negating the self altogether, a psychologically destructive tendency of many. See White, *Atonement*, 53–54.

³⁵ White, *Atonement*, 39–40.

³⁶ Derived from White’s understanding of ‘interpersonal’ relationships and ‘incorporation’ as ‘causal links’; White, *Atonement*, 55–56.

³⁷ White, *Atonement*, 39.

empathy, but the deep firsthand sharing of a 'fellow-sufferer who understands.'³⁸ Another is by *successfully traversing the same passage we too must cross ahead of us*. Christ is thereby affirmed for us as an experienced, qualified guide who 'knows all the ropes' we, too, must learn and effectively manage. The third, by implication, is *leading us along the only moral and sure route to redemption*, no misleading sidetracks, or false shortcuts.

Christ can also bring us along of our free accord with *interpersonal causality*.³⁹ Transcending all time and space limits, Christ can share his proven experience with everyone, employing the power of intimate individual rapport. White suggests that this is evident to lesser extent in a healthy parent-child bond. The parent's advanced experience can draw the child into the same maturity or skill (e.g. riding a bicycle or learning to drive) without compromising the youth's own integrity. How much more effective might this be, White argues, when one of the participants is Christ's spirit, acting without spatiotemporal constraints at the deepest level of intimacy.

Christ can also move us forward freely with *incorporative causality*.⁴⁰ As just noted, we can be changed within the subtleties of a close personal relationship by following another, consciously or unconsciously. But, as White states, we are changed ". . . not just by one individual's effort to follow another, but also by some sort of 'incorporation' into another person that we are changed."⁴¹ This happens similarly to the way that our identity, individually and collectively, is affected by our interactions with others. Where through interpersonal causality Christ's spirit acts *in* and *with* us, through incorporative causality we are also *in* Christ, to the extent that we participate in the core events that bear his action and identity. The degree of intimacy here is causally much more than through our connection with others. This is because of God's capacity to access and influence every event of our personal lives, internally and externally, at both micro and macro levels.⁴² Thus our being *in* Christ and Christ being *in* and *with* us, through the Spirit, helps account for how in the messianic age we all may follow Christ freely, no matter our differences, to *full reconciliation* with God and neighbor.⁴³

While it is important to appreciate what the incarnate Christ is able to do for us through the *mutual sharing* of divine and human experiences, it is also important to appreciate the full import of this sharing. While we share in his resurrection and glory, we also share in his death and suffering, what Morna Hooker calls the 'interchange of suffering.'⁴⁴ Being *in* Christ and following him freely through the process of re-creating evil into greater good

³⁸ White, *Atonement*, 40. Phrase attributed to Alfred North Whitehead.

³⁹ White, *Atonement*, 55.

⁴⁰ White, *Atonement*, 56.

⁴¹ White, *Atonement*, 56.

⁴² White, *Atonement*, 67.

⁴³ White, *Atonement*, 91. White also references Swinburne's appeal to eschatological atonement, in which the wrongdoer meets the victim with endless time to forgive and reconcile through repentance, apology, reparation. See White, *Atonement*, 125; Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon) 89.

⁴⁴ Morna D. Hooker, "Interchange and Suffering," William Horbury and Brian McNeil (eds.), *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 70–83.

includes our responsibility. We cannot skip our earthly journey. Christ does not travel it for us or rescue us from it, though we cannot do it without him. Rather, it is precisely by being human and doing our best to follow ‘the way’ of Christ here and now that we can reach our destination that God intends.

White’s Theology—Humans Reconciling with God

White’s theology on *humans reconciling with God* is set out in two books *The Fall of a Sparrow* and *Purpose and Providence*.⁴⁵ From them I outline his work examining God’s justice and loving goodness despite evil and suffering in the world. One aspect is White’s case against a ‘flaw’ in theodicy ‘instrumentalism,’ which infers that God intends *evil as a means to good* in this world thereby justifying evil.⁴⁶ White argues that the wickedness of this contingent world is not God’s intention.⁴⁷ Rather, it is to connect evil with divine purpose over wider spans of time and space such that it is integral to realizing God’s purpose, but ‘not instrumentalized’ for it. It is always a wider meaning that God intends, a good created out of evil events for the benefit of those who suffered the evil, not just for the good of others. It follows that what God intends is a ‘context of redemption,’ wherein evil is transformed, not just outweighed, compensated for, or replaced. Hence, it is always ‘transformed evil’ that God desires: evil recreated into a good that defeats it. It may help understanding here to juxtapose what God *does not* intend about evil with what God *does* intend about evil:

What God <i>DOES NOT</i> Intend	What God <i>DOES</i> Intend
God does <i>not</i> intend evil for itself.	God <i>does</i> intend the <i>wider context of meaning</i> , wherein good is created out of evil events for the benefit of its victims, as well as others.
God does <i>not</i> intend evil as a specific <i>purpose</i> or even the <i>object</i> of divine purpose.	God <i>does</i> intend that evil be made to <i>connect with</i> divine purpose, as integral within the realization of divine purpose, without being its object.
God does <i>not</i> intend evil unchanged within the process of redemption, nor evil <i>just</i> outweighed, compensated for, or replaced.	God <i>does</i> intend evil <i>transformed</i> within the process of redemption (i.e. evil <i>recreated</i> into a good that <i>overcomes</i> that evil).
God does <i>not</i> intend evil as a <i>means to (instrument for)</i> good regardless of the outcome.	God <i>does</i> intend evil as a <i>means to</i> (instrument for) good <i>only in so far as</i> the good overcomes that evil.

⁴⁵ Vernon P. White, *The Fall of a Sparrow: A Concept of Special Divine Action*, (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1985); Vernon P. White, *Purpose and Providence: Taking Soundings in Western Thought, Literature and Theology*, (New York: Good Books, an imprint of Skyhorse Publishing, Inc. 2015).

⁴⁶ White, *Purpose and Providence*, 134.

⁴⁷ White, *Purpose and Providence*, 150.

Finally, despite its potential for evil, freewill is essential to human relationships. For example, it is required for mutual love to be true love, mutual trust to be genuine trust, and cooperative behavior to be cooperative. It is also an essential feature of being created in God's image and our co-partnering in God's redeeming work. We do abuse freewill, but God's final intentions for the world is not blocked by our bad choices.

In view of the evil, suffering, and death in today's world, complaints to God on these counts are numerous and personal. Some are addressed below in the last section under the fourth concern. Whether or not to *reconcile with God*.

Counseling Strategies for Forgiveness & Reconciliation

The following strategies are derived largely from Cantacuzino's book *The Forgiveness Project* but also from the theological research of Anthony Priddis, Jennifer Loop, and Christiane Sanderson. Cantacuzino's book documents research she began in 2003 'collecting stories in words and pictures from people who had lived through violence, tragedy or injustice and sought forgiveness or reconciliation rather than retaliation or revenge.'⁴⁸ A 2004 exhibition of these photos and personal narratives from around the world, titled 'The F Word,' led to her founding a UK-based charity *The Forgiveness Project* (www.theforgivenessproject.com), which also runs a prison program RESTORE in England and Wales. Her work is also discussed in a brief 2017 interview with Amy Frykholm in *The Christian Century*, titled 'What is Forgiveness?'⁴⁹

When contemplating or pursuing forgiveness and reconciliation challenging realities are revealed, unique for each person and context, often leading to confusion, misunderstanding, and resistance. Because of this complexity, Cantacuzino's own approach to fostering the benefits of forgiveness and reconciliation might be described as 'non-prescriptive.'⁵⁰ The following strategies for ministry reflect this approach. Those derived from Cantacuzino's book came from its introductory portion and my own analysis of the personal narratives and testimonies (forty-six persons, nineteen countries) assembled at its end.

1. To help the parishioner heal the minister must provide an emotionally and intellectually *safe space*. The following six approaches (2 through 7) are only some ways to do this.
2. Employ *language* appropriate to the particular situation and the individual's experience of it. In the case of abuse, for example, the abused person may be best

⁴⁸ Cantacuzino, *Forgiveness Project*, 217–18.

⁴⁹ Amy Frykholm, "What is Forgiveness," *The Christian Century: Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully* (March 29, 2017), 10–11.

⁵⁰ Cantacuzino, *Forgiveness Project*, 1–43.

- referred to as a '*survivor*,' rather than a 'victim,' or other word or phrase the survivor prefers.⁵¹
3. Allow time for the parishioner (victim, offender, or both) to identify and accept (not coverup) their true emotions in a context where they are legitimized as such, genuinely felt, and adequately processed, before raising and exploring potential actions to resolve harmful ones, to include forgiveness and reconciliation.⁵² The need to refer the parishioner for outside professional counseling may be evident at this time.
 4. Serve as a *facilitator*, *enabler*, and *guide*, in contrast to a *prescriber*, *authoritarian*, or *enforcer*. Because forgiveness and reconciliation may not be right or initially right for everyone (see above), *prescriptive obligation*, *coercive belittling*, or *alarming*, and *unrealistic bolstering* of those who choose or choose not to forgive or reconcile must be avoided. If not, the result can be 're-victimization.'⁵³
 5. Send clear signals that the parishioner is free to *choose if, when, where, and how* to proceed, whatever path is taken. This also allows both minister and parishioner the needed *flexibility* for getting through 'the up-down-backwards-forwards-inside-outside-on-off quality' involved.⁵⁴
 6. Include ideas from current behavioral research so that the counseling is interdisciplinary, allowing the context of the particular situation and person to indicate the role of theology in the guidance.⁵⁵ The aim is to maximize healing, in part by avoiding misuse of scripture but also by affording due weight to its redeeming value.
 7. *Invite* the parishioner to *explore* approaches to healing that may be most effective for the particular person and predicament. These may be methods other than or prior to forgiveness and reconciliation.
 8. Inform early on those who elect to investigate or pursue forgiveness and reconciliation that the journey can be hard and drawn-out, despite the potential transformative benefits. As Rowan Williams has warned, if easy it would be as if the suffering doesn't truly matter.⁵⁶
 9. Select the best strategy for conveying information most salient for the particular parishioner and circumstances. Goals include helping the parishioners *explore* possible answers to their questions and improve their understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation, such as overcoming common misunderstandings, revealing

⁵¹ Priddis, *Forgiveness*, 60. Cited in Loop, "Preventing Abusive Theology," 76.

⁵² For example, see Christiane Sanderson, "The Role of Forgiveness After Interpersonal Abuse: Danger or Road to Recovery and Healing?" in Stephen Hance (ed), *Forgiveness in Practice* (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers), 138.

⁵³ Cantacuzino, *Forgiveness Project*, 20.

⁵⁴ Cantacuzino, *Forgiveness Project*, 11.

⁵⁵ Loop, "Preventing Abusive Theology," 77–79.

⁵⁶ Cantacuzino, *Forgiveness Project*, 14.

surprising challenges, and finding hope along the way. Strategies in addition to personal discussion can be suggested reading. For some this will include reading in theology, for others reading about real-life examples of forgiveness and reconciliation may be best.

10. Cantacuzino advocates first exploring a wide range of firsthand narratives, which reveal the unvarnished reality involved, including the complexity, risk, pain, as well as transformative power. These stories allow some psychological distance and time for unpressured reflection.⁵⁷ Her book is a wonderful resource for this exploration and, of course, ministers can collect their own contemporary stories.
11. Many of the personal narratives in her book indicate help in healing by creating a personally significant ‘concrete’ event or object that can remain at least for a short while after the original offense. Examples might include a scrapbook, planting a tree, or forming a foundation in the victim’s name. All are *new creations* of healing and goodwill in response to evil that can benefit others as well as the victim, with the potential to multiply that benefit over time.

En Route to Healing and On Toward Abundant Life with God and Neighbor

Next is a summary of the forgoing in a way aimed at praxis. It briefly redescribes what is involved in interpersonal *forgiveness* and *reconciliation* and our *reconciling with God* followed with some common parishioner *concerns* and possible pastoral *responses* to them. The summary is condensed from parts of the theologies of White, Bash, Priddis, and Hance.

Offering Forgiveness

The victim’s ascent up the slopes of offering forgiveness can be difficult, take time, and differ in sequence for each climber and climate. These slopes include the following (derived mostly from Hance):⁵⁸

- The victim *responds* to the wrongdoing by acknowledging the harm received, facing up to its effect, and being truthful about its consequences.
- Then, if and when ready, the victim *forgives* the wrongdoer in a conscious, considered, and straight forward way, with the intention of releasing bitterness and resentment, the right to revenge, and any sense of moral superiority or obligation. Persons of faith might also ask God for help.
- The forgiveness may or may not be in response to the wrongdoer’s prior repentance and efforts at restitution.

⁵⁷ Cantacuzino, *Forgiveness Project*, 7.

⁵⁸ Hance, “A Pastor Looks at Forgiveness,” 135.

Receiving Forgiveness

The offender's ascent up the slopes of receiving forgiveness can be difficult, take time, and differ in sequence for each climber and climate. These slopes include the following (derived mostly from Priddis and Bash):⁵⁹

- *Recognizing and acknowledging* that the action (or failure to act) was in fact *harmful* to the victim without minimizing or exaggerating it. Both wrongdoer and victim need to recognize, attend to, and *agree* that the harm is *morally wrong* (not just annoying) and actually occurred (neither side dismissing it as trivial or unreal).
- Accepting *appropriate responsibility* for the wrongdoing, even as the responsibility can often be spread more widely, as in the aftermath of one's upbringing.
- Feeling *genuine remorse* for the victim and the harm the victim suffered. This can increase the wrongdoer's resolve and ability to scale the slopes described next.
- *Repenting/apologizing* for the harm done, expressed either explicitly or through some other behavior the victim recognizes. This also pertains to acknowledging harm, accepting responsibility, and showing remorse. If the harm caused is unlawful, inform the police if not done so previously. In so doing, judicial justice is pursued and seen to be pursued.
- Making *amends/restitution* for the wrongdoing in a way helpful to its repair/healing within the capability of the wrongdoer. In complex situations, involving psychological and social damage, adequate and appropriate restitution may not be clear or realistic. But exploring possibilities and sharing them with the victim, if possible, is helpful for both victim and offender.
- *Resolving* not to repeat the wrongdoing. Because it is not easy to maintain this resolve over time, it is important to increase understanding of the offense, including why and how it happened and any situations that triggered it. Once they are identified take steps to avoid them, which may include breaking off a relationship or leaving a group membership. Outside support may be useful.

Reconciliation Between Victim and Wrongdoer

Both victim and offender should *choose if and when* to pursue reconciliation. Here is when and where the roads of *offering* forgiveness and *receiving* forgiveness converge. If the reconciliation is to last and fully so it must be securely grounded on as complete truth and justice as possible. Deal openly with minor injustices, rather than bury or ignore them, else they remain and worsen over time. The re-created relationship may include helping each other to heal and grow, independently or in partnership, toward new positive futures.

⁵⁹ Priddis, *Forgiveness*, 83–99; Bash, *Just Forgiveness*, 30–32.

Reconciling with God. In the scripture quoted earlier Paul writes not only that ‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself’ but also ‘we entreat you on behalf of Christ, *be reconciled to God*’ (2 Cor. 5.19–20, emphasis added). I understand these two phrases jointly to mean that God, having taken the initiative reconciling us to God’s self, we in turn, as free agents, seal the deal, reconciling ourselves to God. Of course, the full reality of this reconciliation will not be achieved until the eschaton, but some imperfect versions of it are possible here and now.

Parishioner Concerns and Pastoral Responses

Next are four categories of concerns parishioners commonly have when anticipating scaling the forgoing slopes. A few possible pastoral responses to those concerns follow, which are suggestive only.

1. Concern.⁶⁰ Whether or not to *forgive* the wrongdoer. Related questions include what it entails, the desire for justice, and confusion from some Bible passages. Because specific concerns are many, only two major ones will be touched on here:
 - a. holding the wrongdoer responsible for the offense and b. the apparent Christian duty to forgive everyone’s sins.
 - a. *Forgiving the wrongdoer* can be misconstrued by the wrongdoer and others as excusing, condoning, or even encouraging what happened. Response. The wrongdoer is forgiven, not the wrongdoing (forgive the doer *not* the deed). The wrongdoer has value beyond the sin itself, and none of us is sinless but the wrongdoing matters to God, as well as to us, and is not condoned. A past event in our linear timeframe cannot be returned to or changed, so a morally wrong act cannot be reversed and made right. Also, forgiving someone does not bar the criminal justice system from independently enacting retributive justice against unlawful agents. Forgiveness may, in fact, help with rehabilitating some criminals. Still, the forgiving victim is not without justice: unlike in courts, both the victim and wrongdoer are volunteers.⁶¹ If the victim forgives the wrongdoer freely out of compassion and the wrongdoer repents willingly out of remorse for the harm and resolution to reform, then the moral change that emerges is likely to be more meaningful than what the judicial system can offer. Of course, the victim’s harm still must be processed to heal, which can take time. What can be changed for the victim *in the future* are the consequences of the wrongdoing and the role of *victim*.⁶² For instance, reconsider the protestor who was assaulted and physically disabled. Both the

⁶⁰ The sub-concerns under this category and responses to them are derived mostly from Bash, “Forgiveness and Christianity,” 35 and *Just Forgiveness*, 76–79.

⁶¹ Bash, “Forgiveness and Christianity,” 35.

⁶² White, *Atonement*, 99–105.

- assault and disability might motivate the victim to start a school program against violence or in support of disabled students. In so doing, the victim's role is transformed from *victim* to *agent* and possibly one overcoming a similar evil for other people.
- b. We must forgive our wrongdoers if God is to forgive us, according to Jesus' addendums to the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6.14–15) and the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt.18.35). But this would seem unfair or even abusive for the many whose real-world situations make it extremely hard or impossible to forgive. Response. Bash agrees that Jesus taught forgiveness as our moral duty but also argues for qualifications, of which he identifies four (I combine the third and fourth to make three).⁶³
 - i. One is that we are not obliged to forgive a wrongdoer who does not repent, either unwilling to (e.g. thinks nothing was done wrong) or unable to (e.g. dead). Jesus' words need to be interpreted within their historical, cultural context wherein forgiveness from God required repentance by the wrongdoer.
 - ii. Another qualification applies to a victim who is incapable of forgiving due to the type and amount of damage from the wrongdoing, such as sexual abuse in childhood. As noted earlier, helping the parishioner explore methods to healing other than forgiveness may be needed, at least temporarily.⁶⁴
 - iii. The third (and fourth) qualifications accommodate forgiveness as a *process*, often uneven, long (perhaps unending), and unsuccessful, varying among individuals and their situations. Replacing forgiveness with vengeance is not an option but endeavoring to follow Jesus's teaching and appealing for his help and grace is what matters.
 2. Concern.⁶⁵ Whether or not to *receive* (accept) the victim's forgiveness. Related apprehensions may include acknowledging the harm, accepting responsibility, feeling remorse, offering apology, making restitution, and ending the wrongdoing. Response. *Acknowledging the wrongdoing* and *feeling genuine remorse* for it are positive signs of integrity and inner strength, not weakness. These suggest empathy for the victim and confirm the true harm, freeing the victim from undue blame and continued victimization. *Repentance* to God and *apology* to the victim are for the wrongdoing and its harmful effects, not the wrongdoer (apologize for the deed not the doer). Each of us is more valuable to God than our worst misdeed, and we are all sinners. *Accepting responsibility* for the wrongdoing, taking serious steps toward

⁶³ Bash, *Just Forgiveness*, 76–79.

⁶⁴ Loop, "Preventing Abusive Theology," 75–93 and May, "Forgiveness is Not the Answer," 94–104.

⁶⁵ The sub-concerns under this category and responses to them are derived mostly from Priddis, *Forgiveness*, 83–95.

making amends, and striving to end its reoccurrence, show courage and willingness to change in ways that include caring for others. If the assaulting protestor participates in one of the two school programs transformation from an *agent for evil* to an *agent for good* occurs in that instance. Moreover, the participation may lead to a positive relationship between the two agents, from one of enmity to one of cooperation, collaboration, or perhaps reconciliation (next).

3. Concern.⁶⁶ Whether or not to *reconcile* with each other. Related concerns may include a fear of losing oneself altogether (even the good parts) and acquiring new obligations toward another, some of which may be unwelcome, if not unbearable. Response. The transformed self remains the original self in essential respects but takes on characteristics more closely aligned with God's intended design, ultimately living wholly for God while caring for others. This would be reflected in the two protestors working together on one of the school programs. A response here and for all the forgoing concerns is to offer or remind the parishioner of White's analogy of Christ as a *mountain guide*: having climbed the very difficult ascent up the mountain before us, he knows all the demanding stretches firsthand, including the human fear, pain, and suffering that accompany them. And he has promised to lead us personally every step of the way, all with our free assent.
4. Concern.⁶⁷ Whether or not to *reconcile with God*. This general concern raises issues of *theodicy*: how a loving all-powerful God allows evil to exist in our world. Three related concerns are addressed here:
 - a. The evil in this world is so widespread and often so appalling, either there is no God with whom to reconcile, or a powerless or cruel God exists with whom it is pointless or unjust to reconcile. Response. The evils in this world are indeed extensive, often senseless, and appalling. But they have no permanent grip on creation and are allowed to exist *only in so far as they are means to greater good that overcomes them, within the wider contexts of time and scope*. Neither powerless nor cruel, God acts providentially in this world to insure this ongoing transformation of evil into good. God's providential activity occurs at micro and or macro levels, thus is not empirically verifiable, and its perceptible evidence is seldom direct or explicit. Rather, God's activity is regularly realized over wider contexts of time and scope, and then frequently in unanticipated form.
 - b. In this world evil does appear sometimes to be instrumental for good. But a deity who allows or intends evil to exist, even if only to foster good, merits no full reconciliation. Response. Although evil will sometimes lead to good in this

⁶⁶ The sub-concerns under this category and responses to them are derived mostly from White, *Atonement*, 53–54.

⁶⁷ The sub-concerns under this category and responses to them are derived from White, *Purpose and Providence*, 134, 150.

- world, they are *not causally related*. God does *not* intend *evil for itself*, nor does God intend evil as an *instrument* of good. Rather, where and when evil occurs God intends it be made to *connect with* divine purpose, as integral within the realization of divine purpose. In other words, God always *intends* the *wider context of meaning* where evil is concerned, a *context of redemption* whereby evil is *transformed*, *not* just *outweighed*, *compensated* for, or *replaced*. So, it is always *transformed evil* that God intends—evil recreated into a greater good that overcomes it.
- c. If we are allowed to freely decide whether or not to inflict evil, pain, and suffering in the world, including against innocent children, then the cost of human freewill is not worth the price. God’s accommodation of human liberty in this respect is cruel and merits no full reconciliation. Response. Although we have no choice in much of what happens to us in this world, *freewill* would seem to be an essential quality of being created in the image of God. It is also needed if we are to be true co-partners in the future of this world and in our own redemption. For example, free choice is required in order for mutual love to be *true* love, mutual trust to be *genuine* trust, and cooperative behavior to be *actually* cooperative. But God’s divine will for the future is not ultimately blocked by our bad choices.

Conclusion

The forgoing concepts and principles selected from the theology of Vernon White, the forgiveness research of Marina Cantacuzino, and related theologies of other authors offer helpful and hopeful insights into the complex challenges of forgiveness and reconciliation. I believe that both parishioners and their pastors can profit from them, whether contemplating or en route to forgiveness and reconciliation.