

Learning about Forgiveness

T. Floyd Irby, Jr.

Early on in the days after leaving a church I had pastored for more than two decades, a friend said that in all of this I would learn a lot about forgiveness. He was right! I had preached about forgiveness many times, but now I was in the crucible of reality about this idea, this action of forgiveness. I knew that Jesus calls me to forgive those who had wronged me, just as God in Christ has forgiven me, but I was finding that very hard to do. Somewhere along my journey I came across a way of understanding forgiveness as the beginning of a process that also involves reconciliation and restoration, and this understanding has helped me greatly. I have also found these three processes to hold true in any relationship that has been broken.

I now see three stages when there has been a breach in a relationship:

- 1) **forgiveness**, which can be done by only one of the parties, the one wronged;
- 2) **reconciliation**, which involves both parties being ready to see if healing can begin; and
- 3) **restoration**, which is the rebuilding of the relationship to where it was before the upheaval.

Forgiveness is done by the person wounded. It is an internal process where you work through what has happened and release the hold the offender has on your mind and your life. The offending party does not need to be a part of this process for it to bring you some healing.

Reconciliation needs both parties for it to work. Not only do you have to be forgiving, but the other party has to be involved in dialogue, realizing the part they had in the breach of the relationship. Forgiveness can take place without reconciliation, but reconciliation cannot take place without forgiveness.

Restoration, bringing the relationship back to where it was before the upheaval, may or may not happen. It depends on the depth of the wounds and on how much trust has to be rebuilt between those involved.

I can honestly say that I have forgiven those who misbehaved badly in my former church. Reconciliation hasn't happened because that involves others who haven't taken their steps in the process. For most, I don't expect to reach restoration, because even if I am reconciled with some of the folk, I don't plan to invite them over for dinner! Our relationship is different. Trust has been damaged.

Once I saw forgiveness as an act we can do by ourselves and for ourselves, I made some progress. I came to experience how forgiving those who had misbehaved toward me released me from a hold they still had on me. If reconciliation and restoration were to happen in those relationships, that would be extra! But the release and healing that has come through forgiveness is still there.

T. Floyd Irby, Jr. is an Interim Minister living in Suffolk, Virginia