

Concept Paper

# “Mere” Christian Forgiveness: An Ecumenical Christian Conceptualization of Forgiveness through the Lens of Stress-And-Coping Theory

Everett L. Worthington, Jr. <sup>1,\*</sup>, Sandra Yu Rueger <sup>2</sup>, Edward B. Davis <sup>2</sup> and Jennifer Wortham <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, Virginia Commonwealth University, Box 842018, Richmond, VA 23284-2018, USA

<sup>2</sup> School of Psychology, Counseling, and Family Therapy, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL 60187, USA; sandra.rueger@wheaton.edu (S.Y.R.); ward.davis@wheaton.edu (E.B.D.)

<sup>3</sup> Department of Health Policy and Management, Fielding School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA; jwortham@ucla.edu

\* Correspondence: eworth@vcu.edu; Tel.: +1-804-828-1150

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**Abstract:** Forgiveness is a central theme within the Christian faith, yet Christian traditions sometimes vary in how they understand and approach the forgiveness process. Nevertheless, in this paper, we present an ecumenical model of Christian forgiveness that highlights the essential components that are shared across most Christian traditions. Importantly, rather than using a theological lens to develop and describe this model, we have primarily used a psychological lens. Specifically, we have adopted stress-and-coping theory as the psychological framework for understanding a Christian conceptualization of forgiveness. We identify four types of forgiveness (divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, person-to-person forgiveness, and organizational–societal forgiveness) and describe a Christian conceptualization of each one, filtered through the psychological perspective of stress-and-coping theory.

**Keywords:** forgiveness; stress; coping; Christian

## 1. Introduction

Forgiveness is an important component within each of the world’s five major religions (see [Rye et al. 2000](#), for an overview of each tradition), and it is an especially central theme within the Christian faith ([Marty 1998](#)). In addition, philosophy has been active in studying forgiveness as well (for reviews, see [Bock 2018, 2019](#)). Accordingly, for centuries Christian writers have written about forgiveness, often describing it from a particular Christian theological lens such as Reformed ([Volf 2005; Worthington 2018, 2019a](#)), Wesleyan ([Jones 1995](#)), Pentecostal ([Mittlestadt and Sutton 2010](#)), Roman Catholic ([Guerra and Barkman 2018; Wortham 2018](#)), Orthodox ([Harakas 2001; Pahman 2019](#)), Anabaptist ([Kraybill 2018](#)), or relational spirituality ([Shulds and Sandage 2003](#)). These writings have provided helpful explorations of how distinct Christian traditions view and practice forgiveness. However, there also is a need for Christians to understand forgiveness from a more ecumenical standpoint. This helps to build Christian-accommodated models that highlight the shared essentials of how most Christian traditions understand and approach forgiveness.

Toward that end, the purpose of this article is to present an ecumenical model of Christian forgiveness. Like C. S. Lewis’s ([Lewis \[1952\] 2001](#)) groundbreaking book *Mere Christianity*, in which Lewis outlined the essential components of Christianity by describing Christian doctrines and practices shared across Christian traditions, we seek to describe the essential components of “mere” Christian forgiveness. Notably, we will describe this model of Christian forgiveness from a primarily psychological lens that is in dialogue with ecumenical Christian beliefs. Psychologically, although

there are several well-supported theories of forgiveness (for a review, see [Worthington 2019b](#)), we describe this model from the perspective of stress-and-coping theory ([Worthington 2006](#)), which is the psychological theory of forgiveness that has the most empirical support ([Strelan, forthcoming](#)).

Of course, although we seek an ecumenical theological stance, no one can really be free of doctrinal presuppositions. However, we have attempted to minimize the effects of particular doctrinal positions by constituting a team of authors with various commitments. Worthington, over his life, has been affiliated with (though he did not become a member of some) churches that were Southern Baptist (22 years), Roman Catholic (1.5 years), Lutheran (4 years), Charismatic (since about 1975), Evangelical Free Church (4 years), Mainline Presbyterian Church USA (30 years), Methodist (about a month per year for 20 years), and Anglican churches (four months). He also has worked closely with Pentecostal, Episcopal, and Orthodox colleagues but not regularly attended those services. Rueger is currently on faculty at Wheaton College (Evangelical), and has been a member or affiliated with churches in various denominations, including Mainline Presbyterian (20 years), Charismatic (4 years), Evangelical Covenant (5 years), American Baptist (5 years), nondenominational (10 years), and Anglican (10 years). Davis grew up in the Episcopal church and has been an evangelical Charismatic Christian since college (the past 18 years). He completed his graduate psychology education at Regent University (Pentecostal), served on faculty 2 years at Biola University (Reformed Evangelical), and now serves on faculty at Wheaton College (Evangelical). Wortham is a Roman Catholic. She is in the public health professional discipline, rather than psychology per se. All of us, however, are psychologically oriented, and we seek to integrate our faith and our psychology, though we take different tacks in doing so.

## 2. Stress-And-Coping Theory of Forgiveness

There are four major theoretical approaches to forgiveness within psychology: Evolutionary psychology, interpersonal interdependence theory, relational spirituality theory, and stress-and-coping theory (see [Worthington 2019b](#), for a review). Evolutionary psychology suggests that survival is the key driving force of life, and that revenge and reconciliation co-exist because they favor survival ([McCullough 2008](#)). Interdependence theory suggests that relationships are typically interdependent and that forgiveness leads to trust in a dual-directional causality—a *mutual cyclical growth pattern*—which can lead both to higher individual and relational growth ([Rusbult et al. 2005](#); [Thibaut and Kelley 1959](#)). Relational spirituality theory minimizes focuses on relationships between victim and offender, victim and transgression, and offender and transgressions ([Worthington and Sandage 2016](#)). Like all the major models, the stress-and-coping model of forgiveness (e.g., [Strelan, forthcoming](#); [Strelan and Covic 2006](#); [Worthington 2006](#)) posits that forgiveness is integrally related to health. Unique to this model is the emphasis on transgressions (i.e., offenses and hurts) as life stressors and the role of forgiveness in coping with the ensuing threat and injustice appraisals and stress reactions that arise from these stressors. Based on the work of Lazarus ([Lazarus 1999](#); [Lazarus and Folkman 1984](#)), this theory suggests that stress is a central experience in life, and much stress in human experience comes from interpersonal harms and betrayals. These interpersonal and intrapersonal transgressions, when appraised as a threat, lead to a stress reaction along with coping attempts. Coping efforts may include strategies that are or are not related to religion and spirituality, and may be more or less successful at managing the threat and reducing the stress responses. In sum, this theoretical model describes transgressions as creating subjective injustice gaps requiring forgiveness, and suggests that forgiveness is a vitally important part of a healthy coping response ([Davis et al. 2016](#)).

The stress-and-coping model of forgiveness has been supported with a rich network of empirical findings ([Strelan, forthcoming](#)). Generally, unforgiveness is a negatively perceived emotion that activates the stress response and, when chronically activated, stress-related disorders are prevalent (for reviews see [Toussaint et al. 2015](#)). Even low levels of stress responses that are experienced frequently can result in the chronic elevation of the neurohormone cortisol and compromised physical and mental health ([Sapolsky 2004](#)).

### 3. Essence of Christian Forgiveness

There are four distinct types of forgiveness that are essential to a psychological understanding of a healthy forgiveness process (see [Bright and Exline 2012](#); [Worthington and Sandage 2016](#)). (1) Divine forgiveness is at the core of the Christian faith, Scripture, and theology ([Worthington 2003](#)), and focuses on the release from debt offered by God when we have wronged. Similarly, (2) self-forgiveness is a process that involves a focus on transgression that we have committed. Two other types of forgiveness, (3) person-to-person forgiveness and (4) organizational-societal forgiveness, focus on the release from debt for wrongdoing offered by the one who was offended. We will review each type of forgiveness, considering examples from Scripture and a common Biblical understanding, within the larger stress-and-coping theory to capture the essence of mere Christian forgiveness.

#### 3.1. Divine Forgiveness

##### 3.1.1. Forgiveness of Sin Nature and Daily Transgressions (i.e., Sins)

In Christian theology, divine forgiveness is about God's judgment and mercy to wrongdoers. Wrongdoers can be thought of generally as those who reject the love of God, as is seen clearly in the Orthodox ([Harakas 2001](#); [Pahman 2019](#)), Anabaptist ([Kraybill 2018](#)), Roman Catholic ([Guerra and Barkman 2018](#)), Pentecostal ([Mittlestadt and Sutton 2010](#)), Anglican ([Wright 2006](#)), Protestant Reformed ([Volf 2005](#)), Wesleyan ([Jones 1995](#)), and mainline or progressive ([Chapman and Spong 2003](#)) traditions—as well as in C. S. Lewis' ([Lewis \[1952\] 2001](#)) *Mere Christianity*. This builds on the Hebrew Scriptures in which God's heart of mercy is progressively revealed. The turning point in history is seen to be a consequence of Jesus' humble entry into human life (e.g., the incarnation) and his willingness to be a substitution in taking the wrath of God the Father upon himself out of love for all people who are all tinged with evil (e.g., Jesus' substitutionary atonement at the crucifixion). As a result of this humble act, Jesus was resurrected (e.g., the resurrection) and after a time on earth (in which he was observed by numerous people), he ascended to the Father (e.g., the ascension). He left—to use a metaphor in the writings of Paul—his “body”, the church (1 Cor 12:12-14; Eph 4:1-16), which is empowered (and convicted of their sinful imperfection) by the Holy Spirit (who is the third person of the Christian trinity, i.e., tri-unity or three-in-one). When people receive the gift of divine forgiveness *for their sinful nature*, they are *reconciled* (e.g., a restored relationship) to God by being adopted into a divine family of those past-present-and-future who accept the gift of grace of Jesus' substitutionary atonement. Jesus will eventually return (e.g., the second coming) and usher in a kingdom of God.

It is important to note that, in spite of the restored relationship with God through Jesus' substitutionary atonement—which is seen as a deep mystery—Christians continue to commit sins in their daily lives and cause pain to themselves and others. However, they are cleansed by confession to God the Father of those sins, prompted by the Holy Spirit and mediated by Jesus, the advocate with the Father. Thus, divine forgiveness consists of forgiveness for people's sin nature and positional rejection of God who is love, as well as their day-to-day sins. Importantly, that forgiveness does not exempt Christians from social responsibilities of acting justly, pursuing social justice, and making social amends for their wrongdoing that harms others. The emphasis placed on divine forgiveness in Christianity strongly differentiates Christian forgiveness from a secular stress-and-coping model, which is fully focused on secular stress and coping except where religion becomes a moderator or mediator between the pairs of the four elements of the model ([Pargament 1997](#)). A sense of experiencing divine forgiveness can calm autonomic responses and activate other religious and spiritual coping responses. Furthermore, receipt of a divine gift of forgiveness is also intended to activate gratitude to God, which translates into motivation to pass along mercy, grace, and forgiveness to other humans. Having experienced divine love shown through divine forgiveness, Christians are expected to show love to both in-group (i.e., other Christians) and out-group members. [Jones \(1995\)](#) articulates a Wesleyan position that is particularly cogent in describing the role of the Christian community (i.e., the body of Christ) in “embodying forgiveness”, which is the title of his book.

### 3.1.2. Distinctions among Forgiveness, Mercy, Grace, and Reconciliation to God

Important to psychologists are clear definitions of terms to guide research and clinical application. There are important distinctions among divine forgiveness, mercy, and grace. Because of the self-emptying, self-sacrificial love of Jesus and his work on the cross, *divine forgiveness* is God's heart attitude toward sinful people. *God's mercy* is an act of choosing not to follow through on wrath that people deserve. Thus, instead of retributive justice, God is seen as pursuing restorative justice toward people (Wright 2006). *God's grace* is God's acts of beneficence toward people who do not deserve such beneficence (Bufford et al. 2017; Emmons et al. 2017; McMinn et al. 2006). *Reconciliation with God* is a Christian's restored relationship with God based on God's forgiving heart and merciful and gracious actions that guide people toward repentance (i.e., a turning from one's rejection or indifference toward God to engagement with God), confession (admitting one's sinful nature and sins to God or God's representative), renewal (of spirit and psyche), adoption (i.e., acceptance of God-initiated identity in a family of Christian believers), and life within that body of believing, valuing, and practicing Christians.

### 3.2. Self-Forgiveness

Self-forgiveness is not directly addressed in Scripture. However, in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, it is implied that those who receive God's divine forgiveness might still condemn themselves to some degree even though God has removed their moral guilt through Jesus' substitutionary atonement. Those who continue to condemn themselves, in spite of God's release from condemnation, are bound by their own unforgiveness, and not able to fully embrace the divine forgiveness offered by God. Thus, the need for self-forgiveness as part of a healthy coping response to transgressions is consistent with the broader Scriptural understanding of forgiveness.

The experiences surrounding self-forgiveness have been outlined in a dual-process model described in a Christian-oriented book by Worthington (2013), and investigated in a randomized controlled trial by Griffin et al. (2015a), and with a Dual Process Self-Forgiveness Scale available for assessment (Griffin et al. 2018a). In Griffin et al. (2015a) dual process model of self-forgiveness, one must responsibly deal with one's wrongdoing or failure to live up to self-accepted standards. Then, one can seek to experience emotional forgiveness of oneself and seek self-acceptance as a person capable of such wrongdoing or inadequate performance. This yields responsible self-forgiveness; whereas merely adjusting one's emotions without responsible repair of sacred, social, and psychological damage arising from wrongdoing is simply letting oneself off of the hook. Perseverating on one's wrongdoing and striving for repair, without an accompanying attention to emotional forgiveness of oneself, yields guilt, shame, and self-punitiveness.

#### 3.2.1. Self-Forgiveness as Journey

One undergoes psychological processes of dealing with disappointing God, others, and oneself to ready oneself for seeking to make a decision to forgive oneself and then experience emotional self-forgiveness. One works on self-forgiveness. One also continues to work toward self-acceptance and commitment toward future virtue. Besides those psychological processes, though, there can be an impact on people's spiritual life.

While interventionists can lead people through these steps of responsible self-forgiveness in an orderly way, it is less common for people to experience these in any lock-step order as they forgive themselves in natural situations. It is more common that people experience these steps as a process. Furthermore, there are likely as many orders of the processes as there are people. In this way, self-forgiveness processes are much like personal journeys.

An example is offered to illustrate the journeying process of self-forgiveness. In response to the suicide death of a brother, Worthington (2013) reportedly condemned himself because he did not respond maturely and helpfully to his brother as he struggled toward the decision to end his life. Worthington reported that, although he was able to work through those steps and forgive himself, one

side-effect was that he spent a time feeling quite cold to God. He felt uprooted by his shame and guilt from a stable time of dwelling with God (Worthington and Sandage 2016; Wuthnow 1998). This was a time of wandering and seeking (Wuthnow 1998) for him. He described how a psychologist helped him to see his coldness toward God and to repent and seek God with a restored sense of close connection once again.

### 3.2.2. Resolving Moral Guilt

The example of King David in the Hebrew Scriptures offers another example of self-forgiveness, and the role of confrontation and confession in resolving moral guilt. In this well-known story of adultery and murder, the king was confronted by God's prophet Nathan, and David's response was confession of his sin (Bible verse citation for: Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD."). Nathan's reply (2 Sam 12:13-14), speaking for God, conveyed to David that God had granted David divine forgiveness.

David's sins not only resulted in moral harm, which God immediately forgave, but in special mercy befitting his position as king, God offered David words of absolution through a prophet. Because David committed sins that were obvious to the people of God, God not only forgave him, but he spoke the words of forgiveness directly to David through Nathan to make it clear that David's true moral guilt had been obliterated by God's mercy. In response, David took an essential step: he admitted his wrongdoing to God. By taking his guilt to God, he sought spiritual relief.

We find that, even though David was immediately forgiven by God and assured of this by God's anointed prophet, he still felt guilt before God. He was still experiencing self-condemnation and was unable to accept the forgiveness he was offered, communicated by Nathan. We see in Psalm 51 that David went to God with his self-unforgiveness—and it is explicitly stated that the Psalm was written after David was confronted by Nathan. In David's process of self-forgiveness, David was appropriately remorseful. He knew that his moral guilt had been absolved, but much guilt remained because he had inflicted damage on others—Bathsheba, Uriah (whom David had ordered killed), the country (which he had not represented in a godly way as king), and the psychological moral injuries he had inflicted on himself. He was clearly aware of his sins and felt the guilt of wrongdoing. He also knew the shame of *wrong-being*, as he says, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:3). Through this process of going to God with a confession of his sinful nature and sinful acts, David was seeking to let go of his sense of guilt, and fully receive and live in the divine forgiveness offered to him, which he knew would, in the future, involve amends-making and psychological fallout.

### 3.2.3. Resolving Social Guilt

David had not only sinned against God, but he had harmed others who were left to deal with the consequences of David's sin. Thus, although there was the removal of moral guilt through divine forgiveness, there remained damage to others resulting in social consequences, including to his family and within Israel, as we see in subsequent struggles in the life story of David. Those social consequences—harm to others—provide reasons for which a person can be legitimately guilty, ashamed, and self-condemning—even though God offers divine forgiveness. David was well aware that others had been harmed by having the king of the nation of Israel, God's anointed king, defile the throne with unrighteous behavior. So, he also plead with God to restore the damage he has done toward others. He prayed, "Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior." David's example in Psalm 51 suggests that turning to God with acknowledgement of the social and personal consequences of our sinful choices is—for Christians—an important part of self-forgiveness. Thus, people continuing to experience self-condemnation after receiving divine forgiveness might need to repair social damage to the extent possible as pre-conditions to fully engage in the self-forgiveness process. Again, we see that the awareness of God and one's continuing relationship with God differentiates Christian self-forgiveness from self-forgiveness in people who might hold other things



than God to be sacred—like humanity or nature or some transcendent experience. Others who embrace God but do not adhere to Christian values, beliefs, or practices—such as other Abrahamic religions or deists—might experience similar things as Christians do.

### 3.2.4. Resolving Personal Guilt

There also remained personal consequences to moral transgressions, and David also seeks repair of the psychological and spiritual damage he has inflicted on himself through his sins. Again, he seeks God and asks for a renewed sense of joy and gladness (vs. 8, 12), pure heart, and steadfast and willing spirit (vs. 10, 12) in seeking emotional recovery from his self-condemnation. Similarly, people who do wrong might have inflicted psychological injury on themselves, tainting their psychological coping and functioning, which interferes with a healthy self-forgiveness process.

There is theorizing that moral repair and also emotional relief are both needed to experience full self-forgiveness (Griffin et al. 2015a, 2018a). Self-forgiveness will, in its entirety, make a decision to forgive the self for one's wrongdoing and seek to experience emotional forgiveness of the self for one's wrongdoing. Even self-forgiven people might also seek to experience self-acceptance as being a person so flawed and sinful that he or she is capable of such wrongdoing. At times, such self-acceptance can be more difficult to reach than self-forgiveness. For example, a man might forgive himself for cursing at his work supervisor, but he might have a more difficult time accepting that he is the type of man who would lose control in that way.

### 3.2.5. Commitment to Virtue

In our example with King David, we see that he humbly offered his broken spirit and contrite heart (vs. 17) in pleading for renewal, and promised virtuous behavior in the future. This commitment to virtuous living includes teaching others to live as God has ordained as healthy (vs. 13), and living a life full of praise for God and his righteousness (vs. 13, 15). David is truly repentant, but also desires to live a new life. We learn from this Biblical example that in forgiving oneself, there needs to be a commitment to avoid similar sin in the future, i.e., repentance, or return to the path of God (*teshuvah*), but also a commitment to virtuous life choices that can support a life of repentance. Thus, in addition to vowing to not committing adultery in the future, it is important to commit to loving your spouse in ways that were missing in a marriage before the affair. In addition to vowing to not commit murder, it is important to commit to changing habits of thinking that lead to resentment and rage that lead to murderous acts. Just as death is replaced by life with divine forgiveness, sin must be replaced with virtue for self-forgiveness to take root fully in one's life.

## 3.3. Person-To-Person Forgiveness

Forgiveness of others is less about being wrongdoer and more about being the one wronged—the recipient of injustice (for a review of empirical research, see Fehr et al. 2010). Forgiveness is difficult. As therapists, we have described how people struggle with forgiveness in counseling with couples, families, and individuals. Similarly, in our own lives and in our churches, we make efforts to practice Christian forgiveness of others throughout our lives, as we have inevitably been hurt and wronged.

### 3.3.1. The Context of Person-To-Person Forgiveness

Our theology of forgiveness takes context seriously—both the external context one lives in and the internal context of people's interior lives. Forgiveness happens inside of individuals, and an internal context conditions forgiveness: (1) A warm other-focus of love that empowers empathy, compassion, humility, and other virtues needed for the self to forgive; (2) implicit cognition (and the relatively smaller islands of reason and willpower) which help the self to forgive; (3) personality; and (4) what Herdt (2017) called “admiration-driven emulation of heroes” of forgiveness.

Despite this intrapersonal experience of forgiving, people are also surrounded by a “skin” that holds them together as a Christian actor. Those contextual boundaries—the “skin”—are composed

externally of (1) a Christian community of persons who are an adopted family that offers love, (2) witnesses, narratives, and stories of the saints now and over the years, (3) a Christian community embodying practices like confession, prayer, and worship, (4) Scripture, (5) great theological traditions that help to interpret Scripture, and (6) God's general revelations as seen in psychological science and clinical psychological science. All of those are held together, sustained, nurtured, and given integrity by the Triune God. Although forgiveness occurs within individuals, the external context is inherently interpersonal and communal.

Thus, our theology of mere Christian forgiveness dictates that forgiveness will be experienced by an individual inside the person's skin. However, there are both external and internal *contexts* that condition those experiences. Internal forgiveness (as something intrapersonal) can lead to, but is not the same as, interpersonal acts of mercy, grace, and reconciliation of trust in relationships with people who try to be mutually trustworthy. Related, intrapersonal forgiveness is sometimes incorrectly confused with saying, "I forgive you", which is technically part of interpersonal reconciliation (i.e., restoring trust in an interpersonal relationship). Forgiveness is likewise sometimes confused with reconciliation. Forgiveness occurs within the skin of an individual, but reconciliation is a product of two people attempting to restore trust by both acting trustworthily. Forgiving occurs (or does not occur) within relationships, and those relationships can be sometimes characterized by power differentials (which sometimes can result in injustices and other times just in awareness of the differential). Forgiveness does not imply that justice will not be pursued vigorously (Worthington 2009). Justice and forgiveness are experienced in different arenas (forgiveness, intrapersonal; justice, societal). Also forgiveness does not imply that reconciliation will be pursued; forgiveness might occur without reconciliation, and reconciliation might occur without forgiveness (Freedman 1998).

### 3.3.2. Two Types of Person-To-Person Forgiveness

There are two types of forgiving—both of which occur within a person's skin. One is *decisional forgiveness*—deciding not to seek revenge or to get even and furthermore to treat the perceived offender as a valued and valuable person (Davis et al. 2015; Exline et al. 2003). The second is *emotional forgiveness*—replacing negative unforgiving emotions (like resentment, bitterness, hostility, hatred, anger, and fear) with positive other-oriented emotions (like empathy, sympathy, compassion, and love; see Worthington 2006 for empirical support). Full emotional forgiveness (Worthington 2006) is elimination of negative emotions and motivations for an offender who was a stranger or one whom one does not wish to continue to relate. Full emotional forgiveness for a valued and continuing relational partner (i.e., friend, romantic partner, work colleague) is continuing to replace the negative emotions with positive ones until one feels a net positive emotional valence toward the perceived offender. Christian theologies suggest that decisional forgiveness is mandatory and should be unilateral irrespective of whether the offender has apologized or made restitution. Emotional forgiveness, on the other hand, might not ever occur if hurts were many or very deep. Emotional forgiveness is theologically desirable, but not mandatory.

### 3.3.3. The Role of God's Revelation in Forgiveness

Christian theologies recognize that God reveals the Godhead in both special and general ways. *Special revelation* is offered through the living Word of God (Jn 1:1, 14), i.e., Jesus, and also through the written Word of God, i.e., the Bible, which includes the Christian and Hebrew Scriptures. *General revelation* is offered through nature, which reveals the character of God, and the way people live, which provides glimpses into God's image within them. Science is one way to study nature, and thus the findings of science are usually taken as part of God's general revelation. However, scientific findings tend to be held more tentatively than inferences from theological interpretations of Scripture by most Christians. Thus, via God's general revelation through the study of science, we might find out things of God that are not clear or not mentioned in the Bible.

The psychology of forgiveness comes more from God's general revelation, often through science, than from God's special revelations—Jesus and Scripture. Scripture's main purpose is to reveal God to humans, so divine forgiveness is emphasized more than person-to-person forgiveness, self-forgiveness, or social-organizational forgiveness. However, because people do live with other Christians and with those who do not identify as Christians, person-to-person forgiveness is important in Scripture, and some clear guidance is provided. This includes things like (a) understanding forgiveness in broader context that injustices might be dealt with in multiple ways (i.e., turning the matter over to God or forbearing), (b) the mandate of deciding to forgive when beset by emotional unforgiveness, (c) the necessity of unilateral forgiveness, and (d) the advocacy in Scripture and in Christian tradition of letting forgiveness be prominent when interpersonal interactions have resulted in offenses and hurts.

From science, we learn additional things. First, when wronged, people create an "injustice gap", the difference between the way one would like the issue resolved and the way they perceive it to be at the time (Davis et al. 2016; Worthington 2009, 2019b). Second, as interactions occur—such as an offender's apology or offer of restitution—the injustice gap is narrowed because apologies and restitution are a measure of justice. But when an offender denies wrongdoing, that additional perceived injustice widens the gap because it piles injustice from failure of the offender to make a responsible admission of wrongdoing upon the original injustice of the actual wrongdoing. Third, the size of the injustice gap is proportional to the difficulty dealing with the injustice. Fourth, one might deal with the injustice gap in many ways, including seeking vengeance or restoration of damaged honor (which tends to perpetuate the conflict), or more productively by seeking social, societal, or restorative justice, accepting and moving on with life, or following theological guidance and turning things over to God, forbearing, or forgiving.

### 3.3.4. Cultural Aspects of Person-To-Person Forgiveness

Culture, as well as religion, influences whether and how easily people forgive others. In largely individualistic cultures, individual motives often dominate decisions about forgiveness (Hook et al. 2012). In collectivistic cultures, however, people consider the others in social and societal groups in making decisions about forgiving. Importantly, all individualism is not created equal. That is, everyone is a member of multiple identity groups, and the strength of commitment to the various groups will strengthen (or weaken) forgiveness. Similarly, collectivism is valuing the collective, but it can be done in an honor culture (Nisbett and Cohen 1996), a culture characterized by forbearance (like in the People's Republic of China; Lin et al. 2018), or in a culture in which strong norms lock people into collectives but bitter emotions co-exist with the bonds of closeness, called enmeshment (Adams 2005). Most of the cultural research has been directed towards person-to-person forgiveness. However, there is growing recognition on the cultural factors involved in self-forgiveness (Woodyatt et al. 2017) as well as intergroup forgiveness building (Van Tongeren et al. 2014). A few culturally focused studies have investigated perceptions of feeling forgiven by God, but they usually assess that feeling with a single item (Toussaint et al. 2001).

### 3.3.5. Empirical Knowledge about Person-To-Person Forgiveness

The psychological science of forgiveness, in over 3000 scientific publications in the last 30 years, has revealed many important factors associated with person-to-person forgiveness. One of the most noteworthy findings focus on benefits to health. Forgiveness is related to physical health, most directly by reducing the chronic or the frequency of intermittent experiences of stressful unforgiveness after injustices. Forgiveness also is indirectly related to physical health by improving mental health, relationships, and spiritual health, all of which have themselves been related to better physical health (Toussaint et al. 2015). Forgiveness also is related to psychological health, probably through reducing rumination (Griffin et al. 2015b). Further, forgiveness is related to healthier relationships by promoting forgiveness and reconciliation, which help couples form, grow, maintain, and repair when damaged their intimate bond between them (Kelley et al. 2018; Riek and Mania 2012).



A second noteworthy finding in the forgiveness literature focuses on the importance of considering cultural factors. Forgiveness occurs within interpersonal relationship dynamics (Kelley et al. 2018), and research has demonstrated that solutions to promote peacemaking are rarely transferrable across cultures. For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission worked for South Africa (Minow 1998), although there have been numerous critics (see Chapman and Spong 2003), because the offending group was a minority and the number of crimes were small relative to places like Rwanda. But in Rwanda, with over 800,000 deaths most caused by majority tribe members (Hutus), calling perpetrators out for violence was dangerous for minority Tutsis (Brounéus 2008).

Research has also shown that, for most relatively small offenses, people tend to forgive quickly (i.e., following a power curve, which falls very quickly at first and then levels out at some non-zero state), but not all people forgive quickly and virtually no one forgives quickly every time a transgression occurs (McCullough et al. 2010). Usually it is those who ruminate who nurse grudges that point them to revenge or grievance (Berry et al. 2005). Interestingly, although religious people have been found to forgive more than do nonreligious people (for a meta-analysis, see Davis et al. 2013), scientific studies have not, at this point, been conducted to assess the effectiveness of religiously oriented interventions, such as praying for the offender, making confession to a confessor, hearing sermons on forgiving, or engaging in spiritual exercises.

Finally, research shows that people who hold onto unforgiveness can be helped to forgive if they wish to forgive (for a meta-analysis, see Wade et al. 2014), and many psychological interventions have been developed to assist people in forgiving (Enright and Fitzgibbons 2015; Worthington 2006). When people participate in the interventions, they often make decisions to forgive and experience a change in emotional forgiveness that is maintained over time (Wade et al. 2014). Participating in forgiveness interventions also builds hope, reduces depression, and decreases anxiety (Wade et al. 2014). These interventions developed by clinical scientists to promote forgiveness have added to interventions that have been evident in Scripture, practical theology, and ecclesiastical practice—such as praying for people, seeking wisdom in Scripture, pursuing psychological (and physical) healing through the laying on of hands and anointing with oil, lay helping, and pastoral care.

Many other points have been revealed through the scientific study of forgiveness. These have included insights from social and personality psychology, neuroscience, behavioral economics, developmental psychology, and cultural psychology. A Christian psychological understanding of forgiveness has benefited greatly from this wealth of empirical research, too voluminous to adequately summarize in the present article.

### 3.4. Organizational and Societal Forgiveness

Organizations (Fehr and Gelfand 2012) and entire societies (Enright et al. 2016) can hold grudges (i.e., resentments) and seek vengeance, hold guilt for wrongdoing, forgive offenders (as individuals and as other organizations or societies), and seek to reconcile. Those organizations and societies are composed of people who do not hold a common mind, though they might hold a more or less committed agreement to the policies of the organization and society. Thus, some people within an organization or society might hold position authority (e.g., elected head of state) or moral authority (e.g., consider Ghandi or Martin Luther King, Jr.) to speak for an organization or society. They utter policies or position statements that are embodied as behaviors of the organization and of society.

Thus, organizations and societies do not have an “internal” experience of forgiveness like an individual person. Rather, their forgiveness is overt, consisting of political policy and behavioral acts. Furthermore, not everyone in the organization can forgive individually. Power dynamics can also play a bigger role in organizational-societal forgiveness than in divine and self-forgiveness—even bigger than in person-to-person forgiveness. That is, some societal circumstances are oppressive, unjust, and disempowering. Individuals within organizations can forgive individually. But spokespeople for an organization can usually only persuasively recommend societal and organizational forgiveness. They are likely to be successful at their persuasion only when justice has been or is being pursued.

Unforgiveness at the societal level is heightened when people believe that a wrong violated something they hold sacred. For example, [Pargament et al. \(2005\)](#) found that after the attack of 11 September 2001, people who viewed the attack as an assault on something sacred (e.g., one's religion, one's way of life, one's country) were far more likely to want to pursue violent reprisal. This is one reason that unforgiveness over religious wrongdoing, prejudice, and social injustice is often so intractable.

In communities that value forgiveness, like Christian churches and other organizations like Christian universities, the value on forgiveness is explicit, but in the hum-drum existence of daily life, sometimes people do not have forgiveness in their immediate attention. Church activities or school assignments can make forgiveness recede into a place where it is rarely thought of. Psychological studies have shown that merely raising people's awareness about forgiveness leads to substantial forgiveness among people in Christian communities ([Griffin et al. 2018b](#)). Two weeks of exposure to reminders of the high value Christians place on forgiving increased people's forgiveness of target transgressions, decreased conflict with peers and teachers, and promoted changes in dispositional forgiveness.

Intergroup forgiveness has also been vigorously studied (for a meta-analysis, see [Van Tongeren et al. 2014](#)). [Greer et al. \(2014\)](#) found that Christians who had been offended or hurt by other Christians (i.e., in-group members) assigned more hurtfulness as they did if offended or hurt similarly by out-group members. However, they were more willing to forgive in-group members, even though more hurt by the transgression, than to forgive out-group members. In addition, forgiveness tends to depend on the amount of contact one has had with out-group members. However, forgiveness depends on people's degree of initial involvement politically in justifying group hostility. So, a person in Northern Ireland who had little political investment in maintaining Protestant-Catholic separation might be more likely to forgive with increasing contact with the other group members. But someone who was highly politically involved might become less forgiving with increased contact (see [Cairns et al. 2005](#)).

When the organization or society is explicitly Christian—say a church, a Christian denomination or orientation (i.e., Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Protestants, or Pentecostals)—the public statements and acts can result in forgiveness ([Minow 1998](#)). For example, the Roman Catholic Church could explicitly forgive a terrorist bombing or a government that persecuted the church. But, typically nation-states are not explicitly Christian, even if a large majority of people within the nation hold to a Christian faith. Thus, nations do not speak from a Christian standpoint, although the Vatican is a notable exception.

#### 4. Discussion

We have argued in this article that an ecumenical Christian model of forgiveness could be built. We have sought to do so by taking the stress-and-coping model of forgiveness, from psychology, as our base and seeking to harmonize that with Christian values (i.e., forgiveness is highly valued, especially divine forgiveness), beliefs (including propositions derived from special revelations), and practices (i.e., historic ecclesiastical interventions to help people forgive, such as prayer, admonition, sermons, Christian education, etc.).

Transgressions start the model, which would not differ between secular and Christian models.

Appraisals might be affected by Christians' sense of justice, but also by coping mechanisms that affect the appraised size of the injustice gap. Such coping mechanisms include beliefs that God will ultimately make all things just and Christians can trust God to do so, reducing the Christian's motivation to seek revenge. On the other hand, some transgressions might be perceived as desecrations ([Pargament et al. 2005](#)). Desecrations are particularly difficult to forgive, making Christian stress responses more exaggerated and aiming some coping mechanisms at regaining a sense of Christian honor.

Revenge, as a stress response, is of course explicitly proscribed for Christians. Stress reactions include physiological, affective, behavioral, and cognitive components. Cognitive responses might

be affected by Christian beliefs because Christians are admonished to trust in God, rest in God, and seek to discern godly coping responses. In turn, emotional and physiological responses might be reduced—unless a perceived desecration takes place.

Coping mechanisms differ. [Pargament et al. \(2000\)](#) have identified numerous positive religious coping mechanisms, which include prayer, relinquishment of injustices into God's hands, and forbearance. All are explicitly commended in Christian Scripture and in Christian tradition, but empirical research has demonstrated their efficacy as positive coping responses. However, sometimes negative religious coping occurs. People can think that God is hostile to them, and such reactions can create spiritual struggles ([Pargament et al. 2000](#)) and anger at God ([Exline et al. 2011](#)).

Thus, Christians experience branching choices as they seek to cope with injustices ([Worthington 2019b](#)). Sometimes the path can take Christians closer to forgiving. Other times it leads them farther away from forgiving. Content of beliefs, relative strengths of competing values, community practices, and the situational pressures of other Christians who are friends and community members could all help predict Christians' responses to injustices and hurts.

Finally, a better understanding of Christian forgiveness within the framework of the stress-and-coping theory can inform interventions that could have an impact on physical and mental health, as well as relational and spiritual health ([Toussaint et al. 2015](#)). At present, most interventions that seek to promote forgiveness are secular (see [Wade et al. 2014](#)). Only a few have been explicitly accommodated to Christianity (see [Greer et al. 2014](#); [Lampton et al. 2005](#); [Stratton et al. 2008](#)). Too few Christian accommodated intervention studies using randomized controlled trial (RCT) methods have been conducted to be meta-analyzed reliably. In a recent meta-analysis of all psychological interventions comparing religiously and spiritually accommodated treatments with those that were not so accommodated, [Captari et al. \(2018\)](#) found, in almost 100 studies, that more spiritual benefits were derived by religious patients when receiving a faith-based psychotherapy matching their faith-orientation. However, despite a numerical difference in outcomes, at this point, there were not enough RCTs available to have the power to detect a difference in target therapeutic outcomes. However, such a numerical difference has held up as more studies have been included, and it seems just a matter of time before there will be statistically reliable differences on psychological outcomes. The few available RCTs on Christian accommodated psychoeducational groups, couple treatments, and do-it-yourself workbooks suggest that accommodating forgiveness treatments to Christian beliefs, values, and practices could also eventually show a statistical effect. We believe that a deeper understanding of forgiveness through basic research, theological reflection, clinical experience, and applied clinical research can help guide intentional efforts to foster effective and healthy forgiveness.

## 5. Conclusions

There is no single Christian understanding of forgiveness. Variants within Christianity will depend on different beliefs, values, and practices. For example, some denominations will hold different beliefs and positions than we have outlined—often empowered by key doctrines within their systematic theology. Others will have different hierarchies of values. For example, Amish Christians make peace and non-engagement with out-groups of high importance ([Kraybill 2018](#)), but other denominations, like Roman Catholicism ([Guerra and Barkman 2018](#)) and mainline Protestant denominations ([Chapman and Spong 2003](#); [Jones 1995](#)) might advocate social involvement as well as internal Christian formation of character ([Wright 2006](#)). Others will develop different community practices. Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions' confession of members to priests ([Guerra and Barkman 2018](#); [Pahman 2019](#)) encourage reflection on wrongdoing and might inhibit wrongdoing. Some denominations or individual congregations might advocate public confession of wrongdoings within a worship service, which might have similar inhibiting effects.

We have attempted to follow the guidance of C. S. Lewis ([Lewis \[1952\] 2001](#)), British professor at Cambridge and Oxford and Christian apologist, who eschewed denominational Christian positions

and sought to get at the essence of what most Christians might accept as “mere Christianity.” Thus, while not trying to sweep distinctions under the rug—such as those mentioned in the previous paragraph—we have attempted in this article to outline the positions that different denominations might agree upon, and admittedly to offer our psychologically informed perspective on what a mere Christian forgiveness position might be.

In this view, there are many similarities but some notable differences in the four types of forgiveness: divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, person-to-person forgiveness, and organizational-societal forgiveness. To forgive is divine. But in a real sense, to forgive is also very human and permeates classes, races, ethnicities, and religions.

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